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EDITORIAL

EDITOR

Christopher John Eggett

01778 392 400

christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk

ONLINE EDITOR

Charlie Pettit

01778 395 018

charlie.pettit@warnersgroup.co.uk

CONTRIBUTORS

George Barker, Andrew Brassleay, Tim Clare, Carrado Cox, Jenny Cox, Richard Jansen-Parkes, Dan Jolin, Andy Leighton, Ben Maddox, Chris Marling, David Parlett, Alexandra Sonechkina, Charlie Theel, Matthew Vernal, Chad Wilkinson

DESIGN

Mike Carr

COVER IMAGE

King of Monster Island, IELLO

ADVERTISING

TO ADVERTISE PLEASE CALL

COMMERCIAL MANAGER

Charlotte Lewis 01778 391 129

charlotte.lewis@warnersgroup.co.uk

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Nicola Glossop 01778 392 420

nicola.glossop@warnersgroup.co.uk

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

Charlotte Bamford 01778 395081

charlotte.bamford@warnersgroup.co.uk

MARKETING

MARKETING MANAGER

Katherine Brown 01778 395 092

katherine.brown@warnersgroup.co.uk

MARKETING EXECUTIVE

Luke Hider 01778 395085

luke.hider@warnersgroup.co.uk

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PUBLISHER **Claire Ingram**

claire.ingram@warnersgroup.co.uk

Warners Group Publications PLC

The Maltings, West Street, Bourne, Lincolnshire, PE10 9PH

01778 391 000 warnersgroup.co.uk

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Welcome



**NOW
PLAYING...**

*Ulaya
Chronicles:
Raptor Claw
Island*

Welcome to an issue of big conflicts and games for big kids. We've got the 4X inspired *Time of Empires* – a real time empire building game where losing it all is just a matter of distraction. We also offer the more traditional 4X experience with *Europa Universalis* – a great take on the classic grand strategy theme.

And we're also raiding the attic for 'Grail Games' – those games you might have played as a kid but are probably stashed away somewhere next to the Christmas tree light you thought you'd lost. We explore some of the most coveted games, meet the collectors who want them and discover some eye-watering prices for something that was probably originally bought from Woolworths. If you have your own attic gems that you'd love to talk about, get in touch.

Finally, we have the big one. *King of Monster Island* sees the return of Richard Garfield to the *King of Tokyo* formula, and the designer has made a more complex, cooperative game that will stay at your table for longer. In many ways, it's what *King of Tokyo* has always wanted to grow up to be.

And on top of that, we have 30 reviews this issue, including Wordle: *The Party Game*, *Micro Macro* – *All In*, and *Ahoy!*

Christopher John Eggett Editor

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QUICKSTART

“Balancing a co-op game is, in many ways, more challenging than balancing a competitive game



**Richard Garfield on balancing
King of Monster Island, p26**

“It became quite logical for us to play with time because history is about the flow of time



**David Simiand and Pierre Voyer on
Time of Empires, p26**

“Being perceived as the most powerful or dangerous realm will make you a natural target for your opponents' plots



Eivind Vetlesen on *Europa Universalis: The Price of Power*, p48



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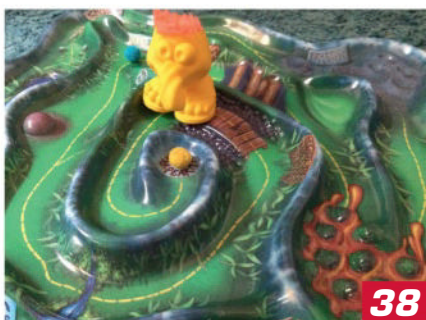
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NEW OPEN GAMING LICENCE FOR DUNGEONS & DRAGONS LEAK CAUSES BACKLASH

A leaked version of the new Open Gaming Licence (OGL) for *Dungeons & Dragons* has been picked up by the gaming community, and many creators are not happy. The OGL is a framework in which Wizards of the Coast allows third-party companies to use the mechanics and rules of *D&D* to create their own tabletop products. The OGL in its original form has existed since 2000, but is claimed to be fully replaced by the 1.1 draft document, it is claimed.

Wizards of the Coast has stated that the changes to the OGL reflect a change in the distribution of roleplaying games (now most commonly in PDF), and that the OGL was originally designed to allow the *D&D* community to grow, not to be a way of subsidising major competitors as they have put it.

Larger publishers like Paizo, Green Ronin and Kobold Press may be effected by the news, with a new tiered royalty system asking for 25% royalties on anything over \$750,000. While this sounds a lot, many successful Kickstarters can fall into this bracket. There are also concerns around the

new OGL's requirement to report on earnings at certain thresholds.

These publishers have announced various responses to the potential OGL changes, with Paizo creating an 'OGL of their own' in the form of the Open RPG Creative license (ORC). Other large publishers such as Chaosium have joined cause with a hope to create something in the spirit of the original OGL for *D&D* with their own games and systems.

For smaller creators, the move is less one that is going to impact them directly in their pockets – there's already slim margins in many indie enterprises. Instead the reaction is that of betrayal, that the changes suggested by Wizards of the Coast make for a more restricted operating environment for a group of people who feel their contributions under the OGL (often for free) is one of the reasons *Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition* is the size it is. We've yet to see the final version of the OGL, and we are still waiting on news of the upcoming changes for One *D&D* – the newest version of the world's most popular roleplaying game. Watch this space.



HACHETTE GAME FREEZE GAME PRICES IN RESPONSE TO THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Hachette Board Games UK has announced that the company will be freezing their RRP prices for the time being to help with the cost of living in the UK. The goal, according to Flavien Loisier, the general manager of the company, is to keep the prices low enough to keep the hobby accessible to new players. Additionally, the company looks to be releasing three of its new BLAM! Published games at retail only to support bricks and mortar stores. The new games include *Farm Club*, *Cartaventura Hollywood* and *Splita*.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

1.1 The version of the OGL that's causing uproar in the *D&D* community

9 Minutes, the time of one 'ages' in *Time of Empires*

5 Video games cancelled by Wizards of the Coast as they scale back their digital game plans

16 Pages, the notional length of a *ZineQuest* zine – kicking off in February

150 The number of hexes in Games Omnivorous' ToolBox, which raised \$82k on Kickstarter last year

\$60,000 The amount a rare *Pokemon Snap* Chansey card was auctioned off for

1.25 Million, how much the new *Skyrim* board game raised on Gamefound

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We asked...
We've picked our top ten games books this month, but what are some of your favourite books about games?

You said...

Storytelling in the Modern Board Game
by Marco Arnaudo
[@IHeartFargo](#)

The Player of Games by Ian M Banks.
[@fredserva](#)

The Squares of the City, by John Brunner. It is based on a famous 1892 chess game between Wilhelm Steinitz and Mikhail Chigorin. The structure is not coincidental, and plays an important part in the story.
[@mikewsherer](#)





Sid Sackson's A Gamut of Games. A fascinating insight into the mind and design process of one of the most influential game-makers of the C20th, not to mention rules for almost 40 original games.
[@JamesWallis](#)

Fiction: The Glass Bead Game by Hesse – maybe my favourite novel
[@AgonSeer](#)

The Well Played Game – De Koven
[@ChimBlade](#)

Knizia's Dice Games Properly Explained is the one I read the most. Just a really thorough mathematical and sometimes cultural look at different categories of dice games, written in a way I can only describe as "deeply german".
[@AllThingsTruly](#)

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WANT TO GET INTO INDIE RPGS? HERE'S HOW



Always wanted to get into a new indie roleplaying game, but have never really known where to start? Or are you looking for a group to discuss your favourites every month? Look no further than the Tabletop Gaming Indie Roleplaying Game Book Club – hosted

by Chris Bissette, the creator of The Wretches, FEAST, In the Bluelight and Treasures of The Troll King. Allow Chris' s obsessive knowledge of roleplaying game lead the discussion of each month's game, and then join in the discussions in our online book club. With various options available including just joining us for the online sessions, or getting the physical books sent out to you via the bookclub, there's plenty of ways to get involved. Our first three books are the excellent *Troika!*, *Orbital Blues* and *Best Left Buried*.

BOOK YOURSELF:



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In conjunction with Nene Valley Railway, we're putting on an event that rivals play *Carcassonne* in Carcassonne, or *Captain Sonar* in a Submarine – *Ticket To Ride* on a Train. Join us on **Saturday 20th May** to ride a historic train and play a historically popular game. Seats are available in a number of configurations for the two hour ride on the heritage steam train – including your own compartment if you're quick. We'll also forgive you for going off track and bringing something else to play instead of *Ticket to Ride*. Book your tickets now as seats are limited.

SKYRIM: THE ADVENTURE GAME RELEASED

Fans of the endlessly-ported-to-the-latest-consoles adventure classic Skyrim rejoice – the board game has arrived. Following from Modiphius's previous Skyrim title, *The Elder Scrolls: Call to Arms*, the publisher is releasing a Skyrim board game to retail. *Skyrim: The Adventure Game* is a 1-4 player cooperative game that allows players to explore the world of Skyrim as character races from the game such as Khajiit, Nord and High Elf. The game previously made £1.25 million on the Gamefound funding platform and is launching to retail with four additional expansions, should you wish to go 'all in'.



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CARDBOARD MANIFESTO

JUST SLAP IT ON

Why you should paint your board game miniatures. Even if you're bad at it.

Words by Christopher John Eggett

The Venn diagram* of the hobby is a bit of a weird one. One circle has wargamers, another roleplaying gamers, another has those who like extremely advanced spreadsheets masquerading as an economic simulation of a 16th Century historical craze for shipping parsnips by canal to Bremen. And then of course there's family games, or abstracts, or miniatures games that are sort of between two stalls. All of these overlap. There's space for everything in the hobby, of course. But for many, they have their circle, their little patch of the gaming world that they like to delve deep into, and when they take a look at other far-flung corners of the gaming map – they just don't quite get it.

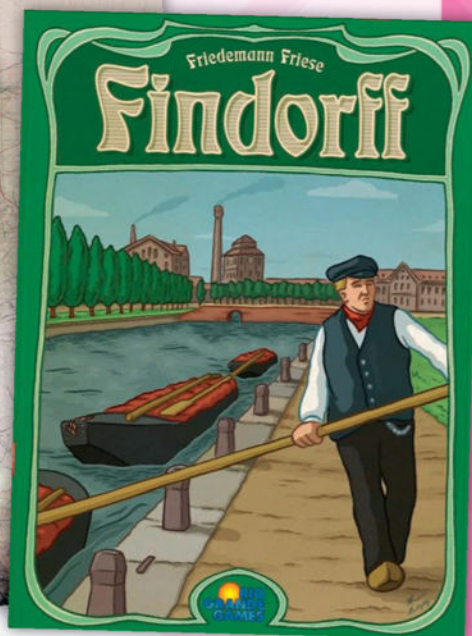
None of this applies as much as those who paint miniatures. While a lot of us have the 'I used to play *Warhammer* but...' as the opening line of their origin story it's something very much consigned to history. Those of spend their evenings and weekend in a workspace with lamps, little pots of water, and a load of paint pots, bottles and brushes. You might see them in their non-painting time watching famous painters on YouTube create the perfect blend. You'll hear them say things like 'Slap Chop'*** – with scorn or cheerfulness, depending on how old they are. You might even catch them sucking the end of their brush, literally.

Those who spend most of their time moving little cubes about, or flicking between pamphlets of random RPG tables, this looks a bit weird. Isn't the hobby about meeting up with people and enjoying their company/



ABOVE: *Planet Apocalypse*, full of miniatures waiting to be painted.

RIGHT: *Findorff*, an upcoming game from Friedmann Friesse about, that's right, canals in Bremen (you thought I was just making fun of Eurogames in the article, didn't you?).



is all it takes to get the bug. Personally, I've begun painting a lot of the miniatures I have because it's a pleasure to get the highlights just right. When the bones on the skeletons really 'pop' you have a real sense of satisfaction.

The other reason is you're improving your games. You're giving players a little gift when you break out your copy of *Planet Apocalypse* and you've painted up the demons in startling colours. You've already invested a lot of time into that game, and so they're more likely to, too. And who knows, you could even get a compliment on your ability to paint blood stained swords.

So pick up a paintbrush, whack on a YouTube video about 'getting started' with miniature painting, and pick a victim from a game with miniatures that you love enough break out again. The best advice here is to pick a game with only a handful of miniatures to start with – that way you know that even if it's not for you in the long run, you've at least got one completely painted game. ♡

crushing them through your superior control of canals of Bremen.

But we'd like to say that it's not just that. There's part of gaming that is the very quiet and contemplative exercise in *getting better at it*. Those who spend their time painting the miniatures from their games are not only enjoying the solitude of getting the right kind of shimmer on that laser sword – but also that they're getting better. It's probably the part of the hobby that's most like a traditional hobby of, say, collecting stamps or knitting yarn-bombable festive bollard cosies.

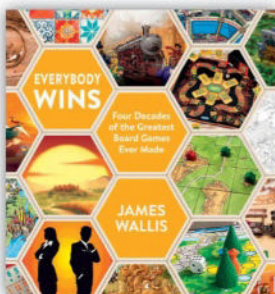
And it doesn't take that long to get good. A few evenings of mucking about with a beginner paint set and the miniatures from a game that you like enough to keep regardless of how you slap it on

* The centre of this diagram is probably 'sitting down' or 'spending money'

** It's just painting, but with a funny name

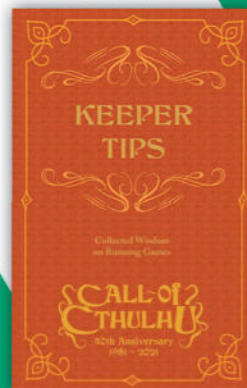
1 EVERYBODY WINS

James Wallis wrote a chunk of this book's draft in the pages of this very magazine. The All The Jahres section goes to make up much of this book that explores the most important awards in board games from the very start right up to today. With plenty of additional material, and great insight into those games that missed out on the top prize (rightly or wrongly) it's an incredible trip through the history of our hobby. This is a big, chunky, book is a great way to get really connected to the hobby. Look out for the full review in the next issue of the magazine, and listen to the accompanying podcast here: anchor.fm/aconyte-books



2 KEEPERS TIPS

Call of Cthulhu is a game that people love to play, but are intimidated from running. It might be the huge potential for really specific skills checks to come up (it's not a big deal), or the sense that you have to make this game a 'horror' experience at the table (you don't), or that you need to know specific history for the period you're playing in (only if anyone else is worried about it). You don't have to take my bracketed words for it however. Instead you can read this lovely slim book of advice from Chaosium luminaries. It's a bit of a 'book of quotes' but the advice is good, and can calm down those nerves (but not help very much with sanity rolls).



10 OF THE BEST BOARD GAME BOOKS

Hey! You! Yeah, you! You're reading this right? What if I told you there were several really good books about board games out there to *also* read? Here's some of our favourite books about games, game design and the hobby in general.

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

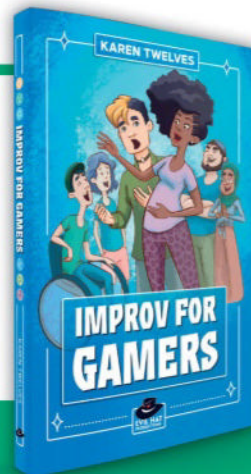


3 THE GRASSHOPPER: GAMES, LIFE AND UTOPIA

Bernhard Suits' book on the philosophy of games. He argued (back in 1978) that games can be defined as "a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" and that it is not only fun, but below at the centre of a utopian vision of human life. There's a couple of editions available to track down, with the newest version containing much more material. If you needed to be told that games are good for us, and why, this is a great (if a little academic) place to start.

4 IMPROV FOR GAMERS

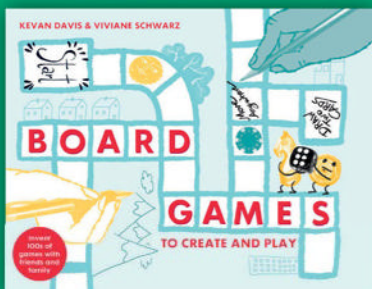
This interesting set of exercises from Karen Twelves started out life as a one-day improv workshop at a game's store in California. Since then it's been turned into a bigger and more complete beast, and exists now with a second edition. The goal of the book is to give players a bunch of improvisational skills from the world of theatre and bring them to your tabletop gaming space, where ever that may be. Roleplaying is often fraught with worries about whether you can remember to do the same silly voice or not, and this book can cure that. Equally, it can simply be run a series of mini games in itself, or be used to warm up before the session.



5 BOARD GAMES TO CREATE AND PLAY

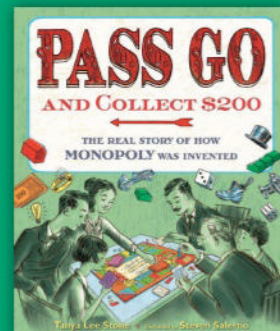
This is a great way to just

start mucking about with game design, from Kevan Davis and illustrator Viviane Schwarz. If you've had a game idea, but fall down at the first hurdle of 'I can't play it as I don't have any components and can't quite work out how to draw them yet'. The book introduces the concept of snaddering, which is quickly making a game up as you go along, and provides a number of different shaped boards. Many initially look like simple roll-and-move set ups, but as you're encouraged to remove the pages and hack what's already there the variations are just down to your own inventiveness. Make some rules, throw some dice, fill in some placements and you're away as a game designer.

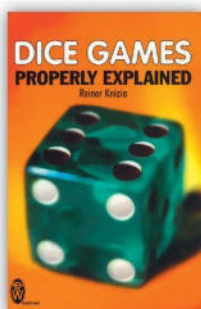


6 PASS GO AND COLLECT \$200: THE REAL STORY OF HOW MONOPOLY WAS MADE

You might not like Monopoly, but it's still one of the most important games in the world. This book gives you the story of Lizzie Magie, the creator of The Landlord Games – a game designed to explain the unfair and exploitative relationship between landlords and their tenants – and how it became the world-bestrident colossus of 'causing an argument on Christmas day and never getting finished'.



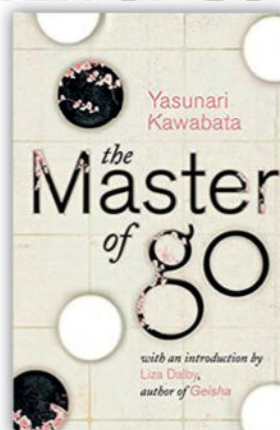
7 DICE GAMES PROPERLY EXPLAINED



Reiner Knizia, the master games maker with 700+ titles under his belt and around 15 million games sold total, offers us a really good look at the way dice can be used in games. A must read for anyone designing games (especially if it includes any kind of luck whatsoever) and also interesting for those who want to get better at understanding the games they love. Covering topics from bluff, betting, and strategy games, the master leads us through the world of humanities favourite lucky (or unlucky) rocks.

8 THE MASTER OF GO

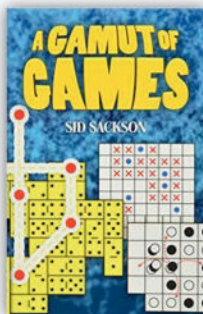
While I've yet to let my own personal obsession with the ancient game of GO sneak into the magazine just yet (more on that in future issues) this novel does go some way to express the extreme romance built into the game. While this is a fictionalised account, it is based on a very real game that took nearly six months to complete. The game features a up and coming player and an old master for which this would end up being the final game of his life. The actual moves of the game are detailed in the book as it moves between locations and as the months roll on, so you can actually learn a little about GO as follow their journey.



9 A GAMUT OF GAMES

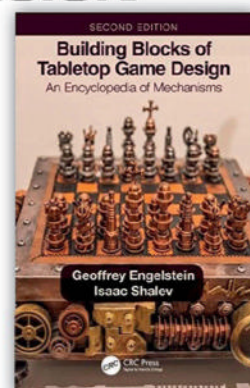
Sid Sackson, of *Aquire* fame, offer players a

look at how the cogs all fit together in the mind of this great game designer – while offering 38 whole sets of original games within its pages. Part a lesson in abstract game design and mechanics, part a smorgasbord of great ideas to get the creative juices of budding game designers flowing. Many of the games have since been developed into titles in their own right, but the value of seeing these games in the context of one another is a great starting point for anyone's design journey.



10 BUILDING BLOCKS OF TABLETOP GAME DESIGN

Probably the biggest, driest tome on this list – but sometimes you just want an entirely exhaustive and slightly academic list of everything. Organized by category and with in-depth descriptions of how everything works, this is only for the purists. If you're someone who likes to pore over the Board Game Geek category lists of mechanics, ponder whether a game fits one descriptor or another, and generally like kicking the tires of the games they play, it might just be a winner.



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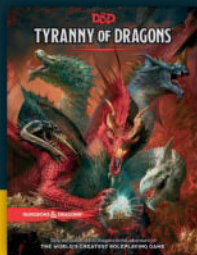
DICE
THRONE



Role Call

It's a quiet time for big new titles, but that just means there's more room for Austen-era cultists and kick-arse tournaments in this month's **ROLE CALL**!

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS - TYRANNY OF DRAGONS

This hefty hardback combines the first two campaigns published for *D&D*'s wildly successful fifth edition into a single epic adventure spanning from first level up to fifteenth. It promises updated encounters and a streamlined DMing experience, as well as a wealth of bonus extras ranging from concept art to behind-the-scenes peeks.

Wizards of the Coast | £41.99



DOCTOR WHO RPG: STARTER SET

The slick boxed set allows you to introduce your table to Cubicle 7's delightful *Doctor Who* RPG with the bare minimum of fuss. It comes with simplified rules, an adventure to explore and everything else you need to get a game going – other than a life-size TARDIS, of course.

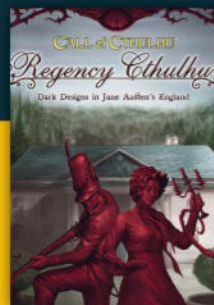
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A hardback, special-edition collection of one of *Pathfinder*'s most successful adventure paths, *Fists of the Ruby Phoenix* gives players a chance to get their knuckles dirty in a high-powered martial arts tournament. The meaty adventure kicks off with the heroes already at level 11, and launches them straight into explosive action.

Paizo | £49.99



CALL OF CTHULHU - REGENCY CTHULHU

It's hard to think of two authors with more disparate fanbases than Jane Austen and H.P. Lovecraft, but somehow the slightly ludicrous pitch behind this book makes a strange kind of sense. After all, there's no better way to spice up a dreary Georgian ball than a sudden Shoggoth attack.

Chaosium | £37.00



WARHAMMER FANTASY RPG: WINDS OF MAGIC

The world of *Warhammer Fantasy* has always had a curious approach to magic, with each spell bringing equal chances of wither world-shattering power or skull-shattering disaster. This sourcebook for *WFRPG*'s fourth edition promises a whole pile of new rules, careers and spells for the brave (and foolhardy) spell-slingers of your campaign.

Cubicle 7 | £35.00

HAVE YOU PLAYED? THE QUEST FOR EL DORADO

This Ravensburger classic is a great addition to any family gaming table, even for those who don't quite make it to the treasure at the end

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Making the perfect family weight game is something that Ravensburger and Reiner Knizia have been doing for a very long time. *The Quest For El Dorado* is an example of this in full swing. While the game was released in 2017 (picking up a Spiel de Jahres nomination), it has that feeling of being something older – something that could have been in your childhood games cupboard. Let's explore what makes this treasure hunt both perfectly modern and completely timeless.

WHAT IS IT?

The Quest For El Dorado is a race game at its heart. From the outset, you and up to three other players will be trying to make your way across the jungle to the treasure. Simple enough. How you get there is a matter of deckbuilding however, which is where the real fun comes in. The board is made up of hexes which display either jungle, desert, water or mountains, or caves (the latter being used in the advanced mode of the game). To move your meeple through this terrain you need to pay the cost written on it – so at the start you'll need to discard a single jungle card to move into that hex. Later, when the jungle gets thicker you'll be discarding more valuable jungle cards to move through that denser terrain.

This simple system means that you'll be planning your routing through the jungles and deserts on the board by thinking about what's in your deck and what you're likely to be able to pick up along the way.

After you've made your moves for the turn, you'll have the chance to buy a card from the market. Each of these will be a kind



of upgraded version of a card. Some have a higher value in a single movement type, other a single effect, or the ability to be used as any movement type. Or they're simply worth more money for buying more cards. More powerful – and more expensive – cards might offer the chance to remove cards permanently from your deck, or offer one-use effects like drawing more cards or taking extra actions.

There are three rows of cards in the market, but your access to others above is only

unlocked when a pile of cards below is dwindled down to nothing. When the slot opens up, the next person to buy cards selects which new deck should be moved down after buying any card of their choice. This allows the player choosing their next card to influence the rest of play – as once that gap is filled it's only the six current market cards available for purchase. Being the player who chooses what kind of cards are available for the next round can be extremely powerful.



Like all deckbuilders, you're trying to create this perfect little engine. In this case it's one that will propel your explorer meeple across the jungle, water and deserts at record breaking speed.

You'll be picking a careful route through the jungle, not only because it's sometimes cheaper to go round than through (and you'll not always have the perfect cards to do it), but because you can block other travellers. That's right, this clearing isn't big enough for the both of you. A careful and consider plan of blocking your opponents' moves – especially if you've noticed them pick up a lot of cards useful for a particular route – can be a smart and satisfying use of your turn.

WHY SHOULD YOU PLAY IT?

While there are mean and amusing moves to be made in *El Dorado*, that's not the point. It's the race. Playing catch up with someone across the board can be a frustration, but also extremely satisfying when you finally nip past them.

Everyone is running their own race, and there's plenty of techniques for how to play the game.

Some might focus on thinning down their deck and hand to just the most useful cards.

There are dedicated spots for this on the board, which can be a useful detour. Once you've got rid of some of the early game rubbish you'll soon feel like you're sprinting through the forest.

In the two player game this option is even more viable, as both players will have two meeple explorers each. You can send one out on the errand of thinning the deck, while the other moves ahead then the opportunity arises.

Others might focus on the money play. Simply become richer, buy better cards, and hope the cash injection will put you over the edge to win the game.

Often it can work, but there's certainly a point in the game where your explorers will be so laden with gold that they'll be slowed right down.

One solution here is to play the caves variant. This adds little piles of hex shaped tokens to the cave spaces within the game. Every time your explorer visits an adjacent hex (assuming that they've not moved from an already adjacent space) they get a token. These range from the usual movement tokens, much like the cards, to tokens that will remove cards, free moves, and playing cards as if they were of any other type. These tokens are one use, but because they're not part of your hand, you don't have to rely on the luck of the draw.

Beyond all this wrangling of techniques and moves, there's a simple family game here. It can be replayed over and over again, with the different layouts of the board, with longer and more challenging games really ramping up towards the 'difficult' section of the suggested set up guide.

And while it's not necessarily suggested by the rulebook, there's always the temptation of setting up your own route to El Dorado.

A timeless classic that's worth its weight in gold (or even, a little bit more). 🎲

The Soloist

CHOOSE YOUR OWN PANEL

Each month we explore the world solo gaming one move at a time, this month: graphic novel adventures

Words by Christopher John Eggett

Much like Burger King, solo gaming is about having it your way. With less calories, usually. And one of the closest gaming experiences to fast food for the solitaire

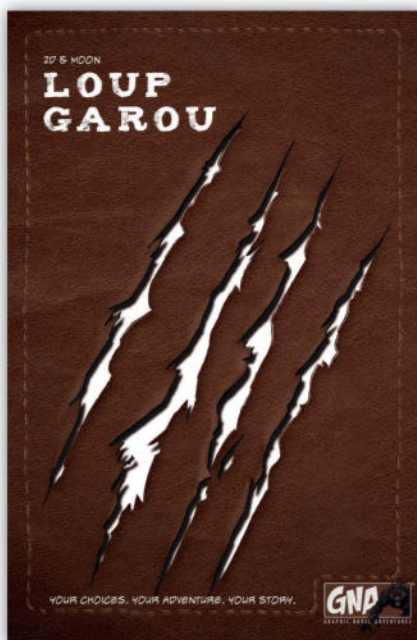
gamer is the graphic novel adventure – part choose your own adventure, part comic book. The undisputed (non-burger based) kings of publishing the *good stuff* when it comes to graphic novel adventures is Van Ryder Games, who you may know for their

massively popular *Final Girl* and *Hostage Negotiator* games. Much like those two titles they deal in a kind of up-market-pulp that you don't necessarily see everywhere, and the graphic novel adventures are a perfect version of this.

THREE GREAT GRAPHIC NOVEL ADVENTURES

LOUP GAROU

Werewolves are a great bit of folklore, especially in this format. Both the hunted and the hunter they've got a context switch that makes moving from one panel to the next feel risky depending on what form you might be taking. *Loup Garou* sees you take the role of unfortunate and reluctant hero who contracts the werewolf disease. Using a bit of dice rolling, levelling up, and some occult reading makes it one of the best fun books in the series. There's even a spell and skills system tree to progress through. It's pleasingly light to move through, and the skill tree gives you a sense of depth on future playthroughs. Come for the schlock and stay for the roleplaying elements.



YOUR TOWN

This is the weirdest one of those we're offering up. Not only are you having an adventure in a sort-of similar way to the other titles listed here, you're also building a town by drawing it on to gridded paper (or the handy sheet photocopied from the back of the book). This gives you safety, approval and a monthly income. It's a sandboxish, simulation sort of game with events and mysteries to solve as you wander around the wilds. This is probably the crunchiest of the graphic novel adventures, and that makes them something that you'll want to set aside proper time for. Partly this is because you can't play them semi-casually like many of the others. A great wild west themed puzzler.

Each book in the series is different, but they follow the usual format of following a route through the adventure by spotting and exploring a path designated by numbers. Except, because we're dealing with comic book panels you've got a little bit of a 'Where's Wally' element too. You'll be scouring pictures in case there's any unannounced, subtle, or hidden numbers in the panel. If you can find these bonus routes you'll be able to find useful items or secret locations – and they might save your life.

Death is often an option in these books. You'll be tracking your health throughout play using a character sheet or, as is more common in my games, a scrap of paper. Some games come with a resolution mechanic such as spinning disc with multiple outcomes, but these can be replaced with a trusty dice. Soon you'll be levelling up, gaining skills (and sometimes spells) and equipment.

Captive is probably the biggest hit from the set, having been published worldwide by nearly 20 different publishers. We reviewed

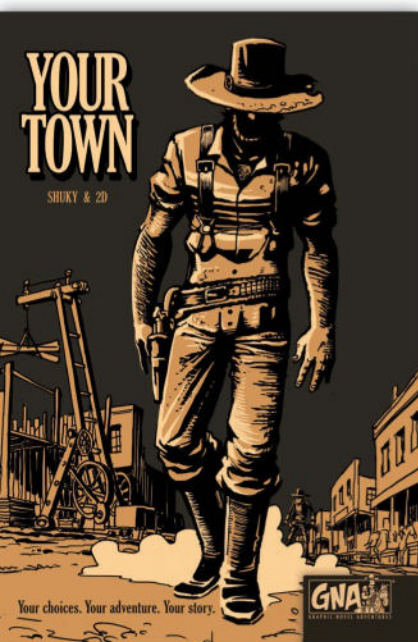
a recent Iello version of the game last year, and it works mostly as a straight forward detective game of finding the right path. Since then the format has been stretched to its limits. Some games have an economic element, or the previously mentioned skill trees. While *Captive* was very much about 'finding the right key for the right lock' it also has a vicious timer, that would cause different outcomes to occur based on how slow you move through the story. If you spend time mucking about and checking every nook and cranny, you'll probably run into a trap that they wouldn't have had time to set up if you'd moved a bit quicker.

Yet, as a solo experience they're a good lesson in not rushing. Often we talk about 'flow' in this column, the idea that you'll be able to play a game with a rhythm, a beat, that's pleasing in and of itself. We often want to be able to play at the speed of thought, letting the rest of the game disappear into our choices and our beats through the game. But that's not actually what we want in these

graphic novel adventures.

The number of times that I moved too quickly through a scene – glancing at a panel and choosing which way to go using only my gut – only to find on a subsequent playthrough that I missed something. It might be an obvious sign, or a secret option that, if I'd spent a little more time with the panel I wouldn't have skipped. Slowing down is rewarded in these games (in real world time, not game time, for those with a timer), and that's a refreshing change.

After all, we're often snatching solo gaming experiences from our busy lives – approaching them a little like a job we're treating ourselves to. But that's not right. You should spend some time on yourself, especially if there's a chance of finding a secret. 🕵️



PIRATES: THE GREAT CHASE

This adventure, part one of two, sees you wandering around like the item-collecting heroes of many videogames, hoovering up everything you can get hold of. You're on the hunt for your prisoner – who has escaped your pirate ship to land. With a much more gentle and kid-friendly tone than either *Captive* or *Loup Garou*, you can feel at home leaving younger players too it. That doesn't mean it's easy, in fact, many of the puzzles are deadly and quite tricky to work out – but it's more of a 'splat' ending than 'you bleed out slowly in the snow, thinking of all your failures' kind of ending. The book also has a map mechanic, which makes your travel around the island feel more like an investigation than escaping a maze. Plus, if you have items left over from this adventure, the next *Pirates* book lets you take them with you.





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my favourite game

ALEX MURTY

Hobby veteran Alex Murty tells us why Rhino Hero Super Battle is his top pick

When I was asked to write this column I was very quick to say yes because I love games and I work in the industry and so thought this would be an easy assignment. But then I sat down to write it – and I didn't know what to type, there are just so many brilliant games out there. Do I choose one of the games that we sell at Joking Hazard? Or do I pick a chunky campaign game that I have sunk weeks of my life into like *Gloomhaven*? Or do I choose *Lords of Waterdeep* because I love worker placement games? Or do I go for a deck/engine building game like *Century: Spice Road* because I absolutely LOVE that game... hmm so this wasn't going to be so easy after all. As I sat at my desk, head spinning, I was struck by something that was said to me by a publisher once "I don't sell games, I make memories" and that's when I knew what I was going to write about. My favourite game is *Rhino Hero Super Battle*.

Rhino Hero Super Battle is a dexterity game where the cards are like building blocks and you take turns to build the walls and floors of a giant skyscraper. After every turn you roll dice to see whether your character can move up or down the skyscraper and if you end up on the same level as someone else you battle each other with dice. As your building gets taller and more precarious it becomes increasingly difficult to add levels, place your character and hang spider monkeys (that's right, there are spider monkeys) and the winner is the player whose character is highest up the skyscraper when it all comes crashing down.

The art style is playful, colourful and fun and the wooden components have a quality finish. It's a big box too that contains three game boards, 30 floors,



24 short walls, 24 tall walls, three dice, four spider monkeys, four superheroes and a single cardboard medal. I expect a top finish from a HABA game and this certainly delivers.

This all sounds good, but why is this my favourite game you ask. You see, I play this game with my family a lot, especially with my youngest daughter who is seven years old. She really loves it. She loves making risky moves and building on the most wobbly parts of the tower, she loves to giggle with delight when she beats me at a battle and my character has to move down a level, and we both howl and whoop with joy when at the end of the game it all comes crashing down. So yes, it's all about memories and that line from that publisher is cheesy as hell, but it's also true because really that's what it's all about and I'm going to cherish these moments forever.

There is also the added bonus that due to her carefree risk taking approach I tend to win a lot which is great for my numbers on the Board Game Stats app. Seriously though, this game is a whole bunch of fun and I really can't recommend it enough. Go buy it and make some memories of your own. 🍷

“ You see, I play this game with my family a lot, especially with my youngest daughter...”

KING OF MONSTER ISLAND

King of Tokyo is a classic. It might not feel old to some of us, but since its release in 2011 (yes, 22 years ago) it's been one of the go-to games for getting into the hobby. It's an easy one to get pulled off the shelf in game cafes because of its quick set up time, short rules, and take-that vibes. Kids love it – especially when they get a chance to kick mum or dad off of the central tile. It's a simple premise – fight your way to being the last giant monster standing (or get 20 victory points) by walloping the others and buying cards to enact terrible powers upon one another.

But it has been a couple of decades, and all of those young people who were introduced to the hobby using *King of Tokyo* might be looking for something a little more complex. Luckily Richard Garfield (who needs no introduction, but we asked him to do one anyway) is here to give us our biggest monster mashing challenge yet: *King of Monster Island*.

In this instalment we're not spending time smashing each other's monsters to bits, instead we're fighting against the big bad boss monster (one of three actually) as it roams the island kicking up a fuss. The game takes a big

leap forward for the series, with additional complexity added, and the strategy of the game rising to the surface. This isn't the straight up monster beat-em-up, this is Kaiju to the rescue.

The game takes place on a large island board with a volcano in the centre. The big bad monster will wander between difference slices of the island, causing damage, dropping minions for players to fight, and also powering up. These extra powers can be anything from simply doing more damage to effecting more monsters or dropping even more powerful creatures for you to contend with.

Thankfully, each of our own slightly-smaller-but-still-very-large monsters that we're hoping to use to take down terror on the island get our own powers too. These come in the form of our human helpers, people like TV crews, or politicians, who have sided with our less monstrous monsters. As you level up your monster you'll soon be able to go toe-to-toe with the big bad, or at least, a few of your toes to one of theirs.

With this exciting new development in the series we got together with Richard Garfield to discuss bringing *King of Monster Island* to our tabletops. 📺

RETURN OF

We talk to the king of tabletop game about his new cooperative King of Tokyo outing, the gigantic King of Monster Island

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**





THE KING

KING OF MONSTER ISLAND

Hello! We usually ask designers to introduce themselves, and I think it's especially interesting to ask very prominent and storied designers this question. So, how do you introduce yourself these days?

I am the creator of the first trading card game, Magic: The Gathering. Since it was published in 1993 I left my academic life in mathematics, and devoted myself full time to the design and study of games. My interest in games is broad, including sports, children's games, and wargames, for example. I coauthored a textbook, *Characteristics of Games* in 2012. Today I continue to spend my time in game design and game study.

King of Tokyo is considered a bit of a modern classic, and known for its Take-That qualities – what made you want to go co-op with this version?

We had talked about doing a cooperative version for a while, it is a style of game that is interesting and has grown a lot in popularity. I ran across the game *Tharsis* on Steam, which was a solo Yahtzee style dice game, and that really pushed me over the edge, I became interested to see what I could do with a *King of Tokyo* cooperative game.

King of Monster Island is a big step up on the series, tell us about adding complexity to the game?

Honestly, I am not sure why I went there. I think it felt like a lot of players of *King of Tokyo* had been in gaming for a while and wouldn't mind a little more game substance on the series. I was certainly shooting for a system that had a really large amount of emergent gameplay variety, one which would surprise players with new situations long after they thought they understood the game. The game was delayed quite a bit because my first draft was thought too complex, it was designed almost seven years ago. After many redesigns – I actually don't think it lost much of the original complexity. Maybe some of the edges we softened, but I think it was mostly the publisher getting used to the level of complexity until it no longer looked like too much.

That is not to say that the development didn't do anything, the game improved in many ways through this long development cycle. The idea of the dice volcano, for example, came out of this process – and it impressed me as being both fun and functional.



THREE MONSTER BASHING TIPS FROM RICHARD GARFIELD

We asked Richard what his top three tips would be for players picking up King of Monster Island for the first time.

ONE. "I have read some accounts that say the game is enjoyable, but multiplayer solitaire with little cooperative impact. The most important tip is that this is very untrue. The ability to leave dice for other players is not a minor tactic, it is the most important tactic in the game by a good margin. If your playgroup is casually cashing in their energy every time, think about the opportunity given by saving the dice."

TWO. "Pay attention to where the boss is going. You can often see how the game is going to unfold over the next few turns and you can position yourself so that you don't take a lot of unnecessary damage, or even remove some boss dice from the board to try and change how the boss moves."

THREE. "The ability to remove single cards rather than clear all the power cards is useful. Use it to save cards your allies want, while clearing out cards that aren't useful. But, be careful of the events... there are times where you shouldn't mess with the power cards at all unless you are getting a huge value out of it."



All of the best co-op games have an option for being brutally hard, can you talk to us about adding challenge to the game?

This is a tricky area. Balancing a co-op game is, in many ways, more challenging than balancing a competitive game. In a competitive game your opponents scale the difficulty, in a co-op game the system has to be adjustable if you want to have that same effect. It is not a logical requirement of the genre, provided the game has a lot of randomness, and players play to see how often they can win rather than beating the game and moving on. My designs usually have a lot of randomness to make sure the games introduce a lot of novel situations; I like my skillful players to need to think on their feet and adjust their play to opportunity and threat, rather than make a plan and stick with it. However, one cannot rely on a playgroup playing a particular co-op scenario again once they beat it, so they may not get benefit from that variance. It is a peculiarity of co-op game culture, if you contrast it to competitive game culture... players don't move on to a new game once they win once.

This means we really did need to have the play range from very easy to very hard; which we did with three bosses with two settings each.

Yet, there is enough variance in the opposition performance that it is worth playing again on a difficulty level that is suitable for the playgroup even after victory, because the game will certainly unfold differently.

We really love the levelling up options that players get as they take on the bosses, can you tell us about designing these characters, and how you hope they interact?

We knew we wanted to have human allies in the game. This game was shifting the monsters from being enemies of the humans to defending the earth (in grand kaiju tradition), we saw no better way to do this than to incorporate the humans into play. Giving each human ally organization a special chart of powers that grew over the course of the game seemed like a great way to give them character, and introduce a reliable set of powers into the game. We focused on making those skill sets work well with multiple monsters, and have strengths that were unique to that skill set. We hoped that players would choose allies that fit



their play style and that the group of allies along with the available power cards would give a widely varied strategic landscape.

Is this a game designed to age-up with the kids who were brought up on *King of Tokyo*? It certainly feels like it!

Yes, there was some thought that players who had played *King of Tokyo* for a while had probably gotten pretty sophisticated with game play – even if they weren't originally.

Can we expect expansions for *King of Monster Island*?

Yes, I am excited to work on an expansion. There are many possibilities for interesting boss monsters and allies. Also, seeing some new support powers would be fun!

What's next for you as a designer?

I will continue to enjoy this golden age of game design, and to explore designs that interest me. Also, I recently did a game called

Creature Feature, which has an original bluffing framework that I am attached to, I might explore that more in some different games. And my kids have been obsessed with *Magical Athlete* – a 2002 game – I would love to see more designs along those lines. My designs are often driven by what I want to play but cannot find.

If you had a single piece of advice for young/new designers, what would it be?

Play lots of games. Play even games you don't like, and try to learn why some people love them. Games are best, I believe, when they build upon and/or respond to the designs of one's peers and predecessors.

And finally, do you have a favourite monster?

I am torn between Rex Florae and, as a prince fan, Purple Reign. Fun fact, Rex Florae almost had a different name because our excellent and modest project manager Florent Baudry was hesitant to have something so similar to his name among the monsters. 🍷

THREE BOXES OF MONSTERS



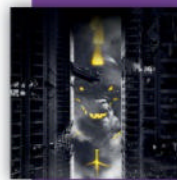
KING OF TOKYO (2011)

The original dice chucking king of the hill game still offers plenty of fun for new players. A great way to introduce kids to hobby games as well as dealing with take-that effects. If it's a little too mean you can always remove the poison card and any others that might cause a falling out.



KING OF NEW YORK (2014)

The classic game, but in the big apple, with a twist. With the introduction of the military threat (hey, what's a few smashed buildings between friends?) and the ability to displace other monsters in other districts.



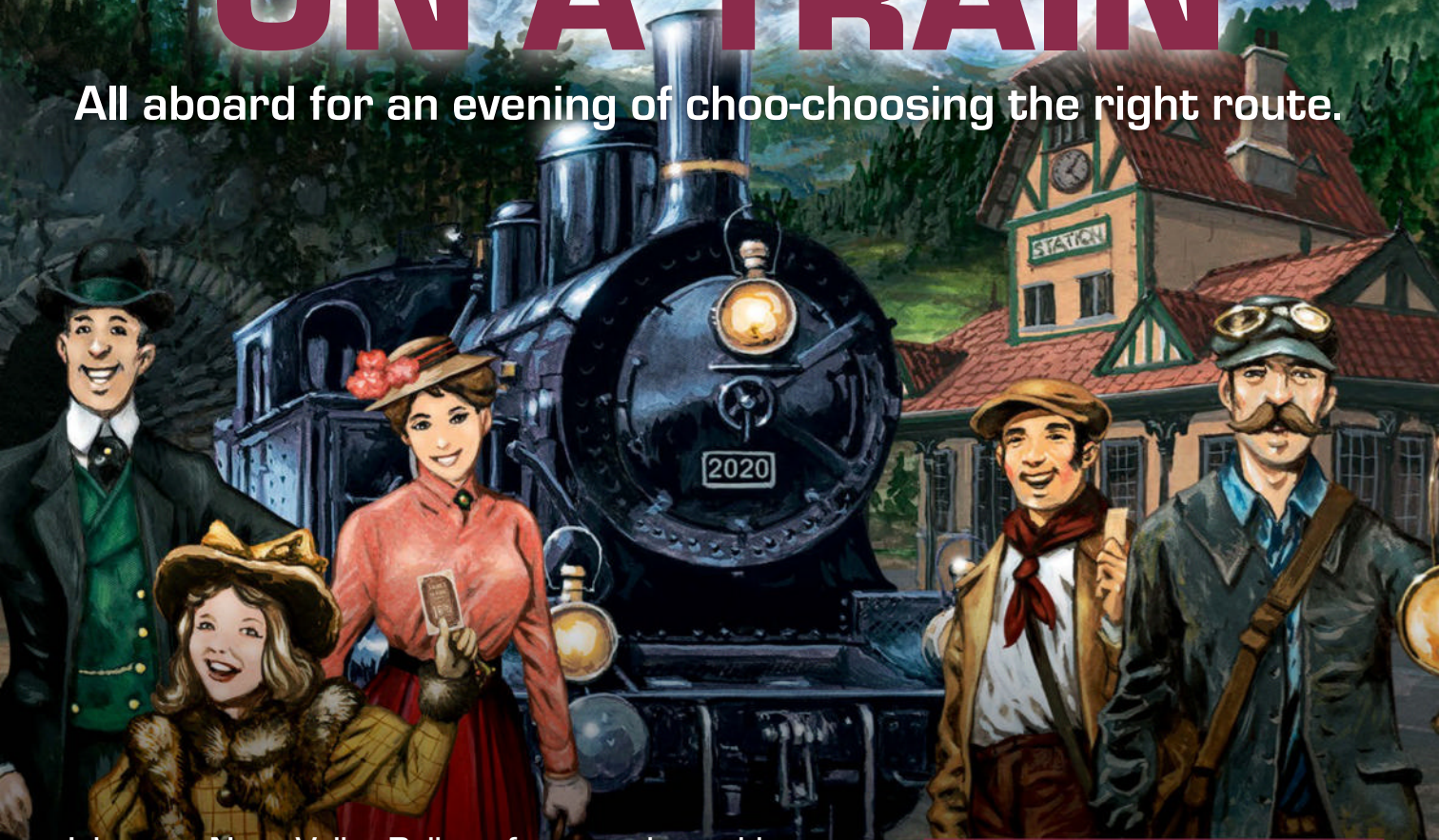
KING OF TOKYO: DARK EDITION (2020)

A return and tidy up of the classic *King of Tokyo* with new dark, electrifying artwork. Probably the best looking version of the game and the mechanical tweaks keep it mean.

EVENT

TICKET TO RIDE ON A TRAIN

All aboard for an evening of choo-choosing the right route.



Join us at Nene Valley Railway for a two-hour ride on a heritage steam train, and play some games too. Leaving from Wansford Station, Peterborough, the train will travel in both directions through the countryside, offering views and the excitement of rail travel.

And if you don't want to play **Ticket To Ride**, or even a game about trains, we'll forgive you for going off track. Bring your own games to the event if you wish, or none at all if you just want to enjoy a ride on a classic engine.



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the independent shelf

NETRUNNER AND NULL SIGNAL GAMES

In our last Independent Shelf we look at a real comeback – that of Netrunner by Null Signal Games

Words by **Charlie Theel**

Null Signal Games (formerly Project NISEI) have revived *Netrunner*. The exceptional Richard Garfield CCG-turned-LCG by Fantasy Flight Games was unceremoniously

in line and appropriate to the existing material. It feels not so much a skilled homage, but rather a full-fledged continuation of greatness.

were being printed on demand from website DriveThruCards with proceeds paying artists and operating costs. In the near future they will be selling cards directly from their website. This could present a challenge in maintaining their



terminated in 2018. Since then, a fan collective have worked tirelessly to pick up the pieces and restore this beloved two-player card game to glory. What's so shocking about this development is the remarkable craftsmanship and quality evident in the output.

This isn't half-baked fan material slapped together with moxy and passion. One pass through Null Signal's current starter set-titled *System Gateway*—and it's readily apparent that the illustrations, graphic work, and actual game design measure up to that of Fantasy Flight Games' effort. The cards are fully compatible, requiring only opaque sleeves due to different card back designs. There are hundreds of new cards spanning all of the factions, including new identities, ICE, and agendas. The abilities and effects scattered across all of these options feel right

System Gateway is Null Signal's foundational set. It's offered in a smaller starter bundle with prebuilt learning decks, as well as a more thorough collection with deckbuilding options. Due to the rag-tag nature of this unofficial product line, it does not include printed rules or the necessary extra bits such as click or credit tokens. The former can be found for free on Null Signal's website, while the latter are easily proxied with standard gaming tokens. This does make for a tougher entry point than the previous *Android: Netrunner* core set, but it is easy enough to tackle with a little bit of initiative.

When learning of Null Signal's efforts in restoring *Netrunner*, most immediately question the legality of the project. That's a fair question, but it appears as though they have their legal ducks in a row. The first factor is that they are a non-profit currently, although there is some indication that could change shortly. All of their cards

independence, but they likely deserve the benefit of the doubt as they would be risking all of their work.

The gameplay is derived from Fantasy Flight's work but does not reference trademarked terms or re-use rules text, and the setting remains vague and nonspecific. It's an odd thing for sure, but Fantasy Flight nor Wizards of the Coast have issued a cease and desist yet, despite Null Signal operating for several years at this point and even appearing at conventions among the gaming community.

Regardless of the gray area they operate in, it's wonderful to see one of this hobby's classic design persist and thrive among the faithful. *Netrunner* is such a fantastic and important game, and I'm overjoyed to see Null Signal Games steward the title into a new age. 🎮

DUDE! WHERE'S MY EMPIRE?

How long should an empire last? Hundreds of years? Thousands? How about just under half an hour? That's what we're dealing with in this expansive new asynchronous civilization game

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Time of Empires is fast become one of my favourite games of the year. And that's not just because it usually only takes under half an hour to play. It's a big expansive 4X style game, but played nearly totally in real time. That means everything you're doing you're doing against the clock, as fast as your sand-timer workers (because it is a worker placement game) will allow.

But let's zoom out for a second, while the timer isn't running. We're building civilizations, developing culture, creating scholars, while trying to expand into the map to gain control of various areas. You'll play cards from your hand to generate resources, and then later spend those resources to build buildings. Each building is taken from your player board, unlocking more resource generation, more soldiers or more scholars. The next time you play one of your sand timer workers to that spot you'll generate more of whatever you've just unlocked.

And then there's the map that you're trying to take over, at the same time as your opponents – all dealt with asynchronously so you'll end up thinking you've secured part of

the map, do something else, and when you look back someone will have decimated your troops and taken over. Attacking is the simple maths of taking one-for-one in terms of troops, with the last stacked token standing retaining control of the area.

And that 'look away for a second... hey! where's my empire?' is such a powerful draw in the game. The end of round and end of game scoring options are part of this draw. You place scholars on these, and the majority owner of the card wins it. It's easy to get distracted by someone muscling on what you've decided is your territory or victory points and suddenly losing it all.

And on top of this, the game uses an app for a soundtrack, timer, and to sometimes play you the noise of a baby crying. Playing this with people who have a sleeping child in a nearby room produces some interesting results. What do you do when the baby cries? Create scholars of course! It's elements like this which turn the game from a tense game of token shuffling and swearing at one another into a light-hearted party-civ experience.

David Simiand and Pierre Voye are the designers of this excellent way to fall out with





your table-neighbours in 27 minutes. We spoke to them about designing the game and getting our powerful empires up and running quickly.

Would you mind introducing yourself?

We are two dudes from Dijon. We're both high school teachers (History and economics) and we are both fond of all kinds of games (heavy boardgames, party-games, table top RPG, and video games).

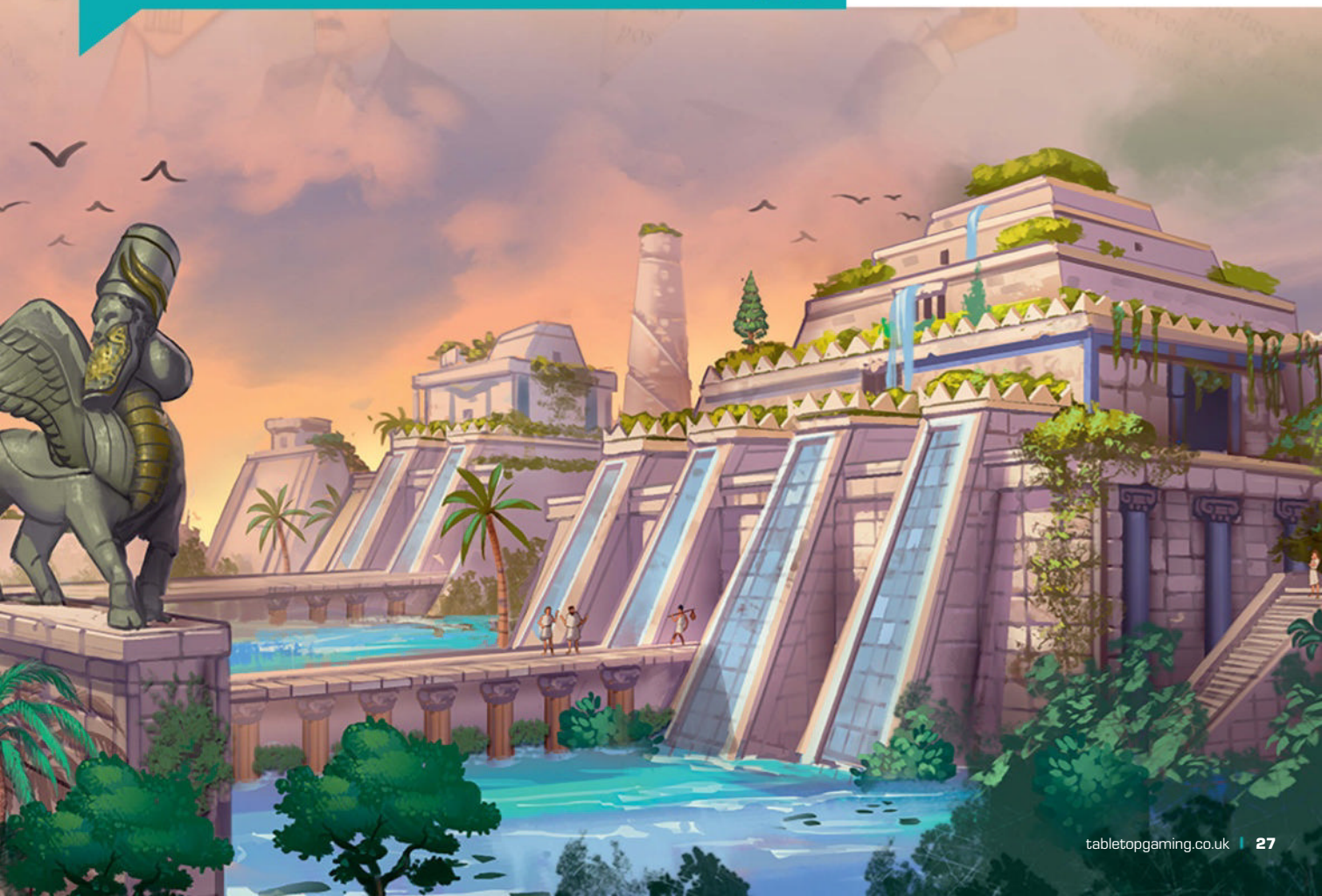
How do you describe *Time of Empires* to gamers?

Time of Empires is a 4X game played in less than an hour. It's a real-time worker placement game in which each player has two sand timers to trigger actions and develop their civilization.

And how would you describe it to someone who had never played a modern board game?

It's pretty tough! In this game, you play as the ruler of a civilisation through history,

“It became quite logical for us to play with time because history is about the flow of time.”





earn points and scholars which you will bid on leaders and wonders. Wonders will give you points for achieving some developments, and leaders will grant you special abilities that may help you through the game.



It contains everything I want from a Civ game, but in around 30 minutes with no downtime. Were you intentionally trying to 'solve' the 'slow Civilisation building game' problem? Thanks! Sure, we don't like downtime in games. Our creation started as a challenge – to conceive a real time civilisation game with every part of a civ game in it: leaders, wonders, technologies, and even direct interaction like war. Moreover, as the game is in real time, players need to manage the urgency of different situations. They need to think fast but make the best decision they can. Finally, we want to create original games, and the civ genre is quite well-established. Increasing the pace of the game was one interesting goal and it was a way to create an entirely different game.

starting at the dawn of mankind until modern times. To do so, you play with sand timers to develop your nation like acquiring technologies, building wonders, recruiting leaders, expanding your territories and potentially going to war...)

What was the inspiration for *Time of Empires*?

Many things! Obviously, the creation of *Time of Empires* was greatly inspired by the real time strategy videogames genre (*Age of Empire*, *Starcraft*). Also, we love civilisation games, both videogames or tabletop ones, like *Clash of Cultures* or

Through the Ages. *Space Dealer* inspired us for the use of sand timers as a way to trigger actions. Eventually, it became quite logical for us to play with time because history is about the flow of time.

Can you explain the core loop of the game?

The core game has four main spokes: science, economics, warfare, and culture. You produce science to develop technologies and get the blueprints of buildings. Then you produce resources to build different kinds of buildings and expand your empire on a central map. To expand, you will need to feed an army and move your units. Developing your culture will let you

Tell us what part of the game you're most proud of?

We are very proud of the interaction between the player board and the others boards (war, wonders, leaders). You need to switch between them during the game which creates a lot of tension. The urge to be everywhere while developing your nation is challenging and entertaining.

Talk to us about designing a game where you're intended to not be able to see everything?

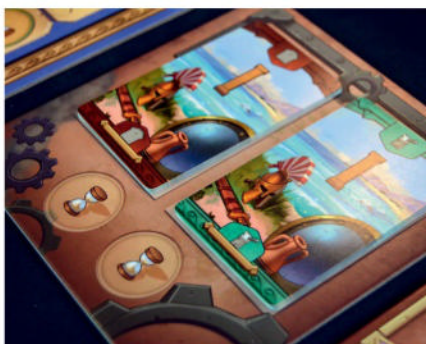
We think the promise of the game's box about missing certain things as you develop your civilisation is right, and the most fun



part. Missing certain things is paradoxically funny and it's a feeling we love, and only a few games are intentionally designed for this to happen (*Space Alert*, *Galaxy Trucker*...). Boardgames usually give us a lot of control and the possibility to think deeply about every consequence of an action, leading to analysis paralysis. In *Time of Empires*, you have to combine strategic decisions with tactics, and choices are made with urgency and with some lack of control. Therefore, this game has an interesting learning curve. In your first playthroughs, you're going to miss a lot of things while optimizing your actions. But as you play more, you will have a better view and eventually you will even be able to trick your opponents with actions done at the right time.

Did you have any amusing experiences during playtesting?

Well, a lot. Our game was initially very complex, and it was very tough for players to go through one game as it demanded a lot of thinking. For instance, during one game, a player needed



to call out all his actions like "I produce now, I move my units..." He was attacked as he said "my kingdom is not well defended". Another time, one player just gave up in the middle of the game in despair, leaving the table without a word and the sand timers still running.

Can you tell us about the component design – it's all very lovingly and sensibly done – designed for speed, readability and ease of use I think? How did you come to the final design?

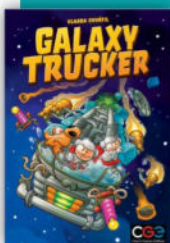
This is a masterclass from our publisher Pearl Games who did an excellent job at designing

THREE OTHER ASYNCHRONOUS GAMES



CAPTAIN SONAR

Battleships, but all at once, and with more people on your team that you can reasonably expect to manage to work together. Yes, teamwork is the best way not to sink your submarine, and everyone taking actions at the same time – while trying to keep track of what your opponent is up to. As it is head to head between the two teams there's a much more competitive element, and it's great for bringing out the worst and best in people.



GALAXY TRUCKER

Okay, you're building a spaceship from the junk in the middle of the table against a timer, and everyone else is too. In what can be one of the funniest preambles to the meat of a game, *Galaxy Trucker* has the delight of – when the timer runs out – looking around and seeing everyone's really awfully thrown together spaceships. "What on earth is that?" you ask your friend who seems to have put their thrusters on backwards. They return to you that leaving your hull exposed at the front with your engine on show looks cool, but won't be when the asteroid hits. Inevitably, you've both done awfully.



PENDULUM

Another stab at the 'timed worker placement' genre. Not much loved across the hobby, despite it being a very funny idea to have a real time point-salad of a game. We still have a soft spot for this one and love the idea of making fuzzy decisions on what points you're getting based on 'vibes' alone.

the final components! Of course, during the development before our meeting with Pearl Games, we worked a lot on designing efficient systems which could be played with ease in real time (like the one-to-one battle system). We are very thankful of Pearl Games's hard work as they managed to design components that grant perfect fluidity during the game.

Why don't we play all games like this? For example, why should I have to make my dumb choices in *Power Grid* really slowly?

Some games are very good with no sand timer. However, we think real time is a mechanic that should be used in heavy games as well, and not be restricted to party games.

The app, with the amusing 'baby scholar' noises is hilarious. Why did you go down this route for the timer of the game?

We wanted to have a soundtrack as you play and we wanted to have some rhythm in the game. We needed a sound that would mark the time and not be mistaken for the music. And what can be better than the sound of a baby to represent a birth. We hope young

parents won't stop the game believing they heard their kids [reader, we did]. The sound has two effects: sure, it tells players when scholars appear, but it also helps players to maintain a sense of the time passing and knowing how much time they have left.

Age of Empires, or Civilization?

We love both franchises but we have a slight preference for Civilization. We love the feeling of getting powerful, starting from nothing and expanding via challenging strategic decisions. We've played many RTS videogames as well (*Age of Empires*, *Empire Earth* or *Starcraft*), but we're not fast enough to compete online.

What's coming next for you both as a designers?

Our game *Buurn* which was on Kickstarter last year should be available in shops next year. We want to make other original games and some are in development at publishers, others need to find one, others are still just ideas. In any case, the release of *Time of Empires* has given us the motivation to continue to make games. 🐣

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and exploded view



Deluxe edition
Grand Campaign setup



Players:
1-4 / 1-6



Minutes:
90+



Age:
14+

Game design:
Eivind Vetlesen

Solo mode:
Dávid Turczi



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BULGARIA

Words by **Chad Wilkinson**

Geographically speaking, we're merely popping next door from last month's stop in Macedonia, to the steppe-filled and mountainous Republic of Bulgaria. Here, in the pockets of civilisation jutting out from the Balkans terrain, the tabletop hobby is growing at a pace on par with its European neighbours, and in the next few paragraphs we'll be exploring the games, cafes, and designers demonstrating this best.

With its proximity to Macedonia, and ultimately its historic trade routes, Bulgaria's more distant tabletop history bears many similarities. Tapa, for example, is a backgammon style game still enjoyed by both countries, as well as Greece. But despite this historic scarcity, Bulgaria's rich past nonetheless still seeps into latter day designs.

One such example is *Etnos* from publisher Sly Foxes Games. This attractive tile-laying game takes aesthetic inspiration from traditional Bulgarian embroidery, and tests players' skills of pattern-building and spatial planning. The aim is to

complete goals by constructing symmetrical patterns, many of which forming symbols whose meanings have permeated Bulgarian culture since the Bronze Age. Sly Foxes Games were built upon the Indiegogo success of their eponymous debut – a strategic card game of outfoxing and eliminating you opponents. Upcoming designs, play-tested at the Sofia Game Night Festival in November, include a fast-paced card game about constructing Bulgaria's answer to Sushi, Sarma.

Similarly drawing on Bulgaria's history and culture is the epic strategy war game *The Battle for the Balkans: The Kaloyan Era*. Developed by the Sofia based Bulgarian History association – in partnership with designer Alexander Torofiev and military historian Alexander Stoyanov – the game recounts the tumultuous events of 1204 when five countries battled over the region. Quoted as having historical facts woven into every element of it, and featuring tactical card

play, resource gathering, alongside touches of asymmetry, *The Battle for the Balkans* sets a strong example as the 'first strategy board game based on Bulgarian history.'

Later, in 2021, Alexander Torofiev's *Hajduk* was a nominee at the first ever Bulgarian Game of the Year awards, losing out to Fantasmagoria's (Bulgaria's top publisher) localisation of *Just One*. Torofiev's game, set between the 1860s and 1870s, tasks players with gathering the most powerful band of Bulgarian freedom fighters as they

attempt to overthrow the Ottoman rule.

Moving in the complete opposite direction of historical accuracy is *TSAK*; a family race game utilising traditional cards and an innovative snap-fit board. The game, from design duo Konstantin and Christiana, sees players controlling teams of peg-doll like figures which slot into the board as they move. Across the game's two versions, players can choose from ten teams, including Geishas, Vampires, and astronauts, with each featuring unique abilities.

Similarly innovative is Margarit Ralev's *Gemji*, a gaming system which uses seventy magnetic tiles to facilitate over thirty games. Tiles can be used for traditional and dexterity games, or even as modular 3D terrain for RPGs. In 2020, *GEMJI* was fully funded on Kickstarter in just twenty hours.

In regard to gaming cafes, Bulgaria is home to several, predominantly in the country's capital, Sofia. Here locals and tabletop travellers will find several including Three Trolls Board Games Bar, Carcassonne Board Game Bar, Abordage, and Bar Restart, alongside a wealth of games shops.

This briefest of overviews leaves no doubt that Bulgaria is one of the fastest growing champions of the tabletop hobby out of the countries comprising the Balkans. Its gaming history may not be rich, but the ingenuity, cultural awareness, and clear passion demonstrated by the country's contemporary games and consumers more than makes up for this. 🇵🇸

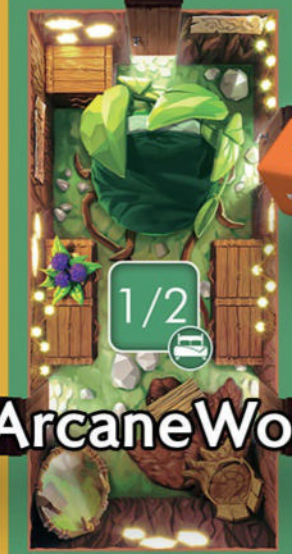
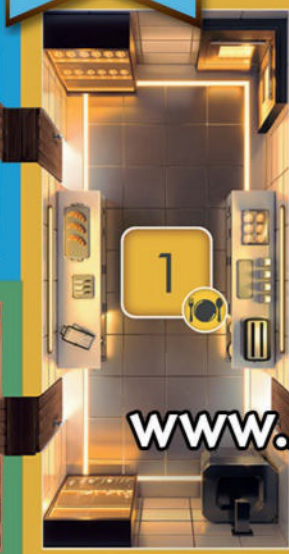
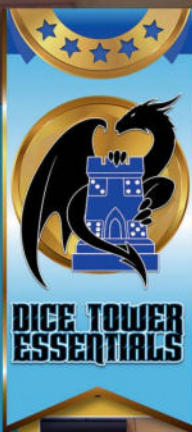
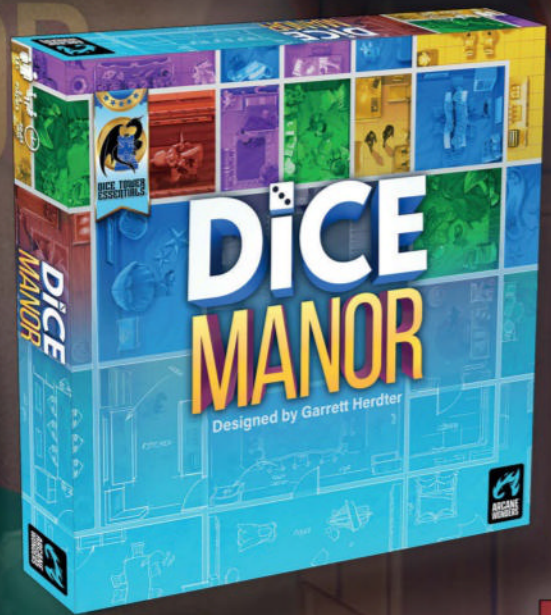




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Ludological Lamentations

A SOLO SECOND WIND?

Each month our in-house agony aunt, Ben Maddox, answers your ludological lamentations

Words by **Ben Maddox**

Q. Dear Ben,

Looking in the mirror this morning I noticed how grey my hair had become. I remember the first grey hair I spotted. I grinned at the interloper. A silver flower, alone in a field of richest gold. I decided to let him live, not realising that, in a few short years, my head would look more like the high summer seed pod than the lion head of the spring dandelion. The fact is though, I'm fine with it. I have matured into verdant middle age and wear my years comfortably. So much pressure departs as your internal rings increase. I no longer feel the need to be *cool*. I don't have to dredge up pretend delight at things I don't really care for. Also a rapidly fleeing libido is far from the curse I thought it would be. There is one problem though. One cloud that hangs over my middle years and promises to drench me and that is my gaming time.

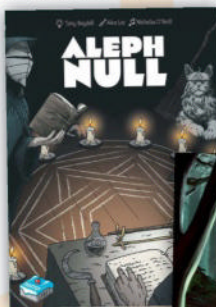
When I was younger hours were empty swimming pools to be filled with gallons of experience and now they feel more like thimbles, barely able to hold anything. In my youth, my friends and I would spend whole weekends recreating Napoleonic campaigns or negotiating our freedom with the malevolent King of the Fairies, but as mortgage payments and football practice have taken precedence over traversing the Desert of Death, my gaming has dried up. I can't remember the last time I sat at the table in my drawing room to a game. I stare out of my window at the garden gate now and see only the faded spectres of game nights past. I miss the characteristic squeak of the hinges as another friend pops round in the hope of a quick game of *Agricola*.

I fear that my friends are now too engrossed in their families and their ascent of the corporate pyramid to think of victory points and edge cases. I look at my groaning shelves of games and wonder if I should just flog the lot. Tell me Ben, you overflowing barrel of Ludological ruminations, am I over the hill, game-wise, or will there be a second blossoming in my ludological orchard?

Yours,
Lonely

Seeking guidance?

Have you got a gaming problem? Want Ben to dish out some ludological wisdom in your direction? Get in touch. Contact with Ben on Twitter @5games4doomsday or email the editor at christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk and we'll publish, and answer, the most amusing problems.



A. Dear Lonely,

The greatest battle we will ever fight will not be against the Guardian comments page, but against time. We must remain resolute and face change with stoicism and resolve. I embrace my solitude and know that I now must simply trust myself and not the weaknesses of my fellow human beings. Indeed, I have come to believe that, deep inside, I truly wanted to be alone and people refusing to talk to me because I was, in their words, "*insufferably dull*," or the fact they couldn't face the truth that showers cause a reduction in essential essence, was just my way of forging my own path and the tears that come at night when I stare at the walls are a sign that my fragility is leaving me. You will see this too and as your cardboard guru I will help you arrive there.

As I see it you have two options open to you. You could wallow in the analgesic juices of the hop or vine and crave the company that society has conditioned you into craving or you could

embrace the liberation that being alone has afforded you by jumping into some cracking solo games.

Being ascetic doesn't mean you have to be bored and thankfully modern games have you covered.

Final Girl will transport you into a world where you have to defeat a rampaging killer with only your wit, guile and some weapons. This is a game that oozes excitement and will reward you with repeated play.

If you like dressing up in robes (and, face it, who doesn't?) and chanting then maybe you could try *Aleph Null*. A wonderful tricky game in which you try to perform a Crowleyan ritual before you get consumed.

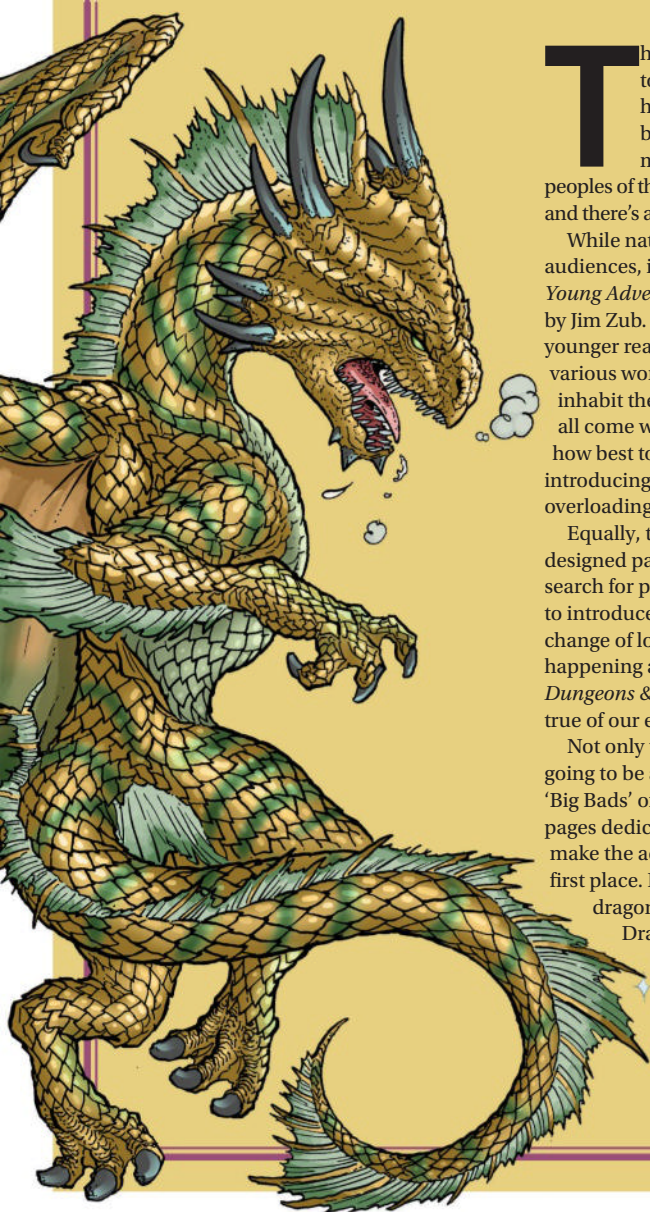
Then, once you've got the ritual wrong and summoned a tentacled Old One you can kill it in a round of the greatest LCG out there, *Arkham Horror*.

The world is a plain of opportunity and everything that is thrown at you can be caught and used to your advantage. Don't lament your solitude, revel in it and if you get bored you could always send me an email at the address below because I'm getting really cheesed off with the sound of my own voice.

With all of my ludological love,
Ben

BEHOLD!

We share a few pages from the just released *Dungeons & Dragons: Behold! A Search and Find adventure* Words by **Christopher John Eggett**



The humble 'where's Wally?' has come to *Dungeons & Dragons*. The classic hunt for the stripey hatted chap has been replaced with a search for the monsters, creatures and various peoples of the worlds of the Forgotten Realms – and there's a bit of an adventure to go on too.

While naturally aimed at younger audiences, it's a great companion to the *A Young Adventurer's Guides* series of books by Jim Zub. That set of books looks to give younger readers a way into understanding the various worlds of *D&D* via the monsters that inhabit them. Not only that, these monsters all come with guides to their habitats, and how best to approach them. It's a cute way of introducing youngsters into the hobby without overloading them with stats, rules and so on.

Equally, this foray into the world of busily designed pages worth poring over in the search for particular characters is a great way to introduce the concept of the adventure. The change of location, the action, everything all happening at once really conveys the ideal *Dungeons & Dragons* session. At least, that's true of our experiences anyway.

Not only that, our young adventurers are going to be able to learn their way around the 'Big Bads' of the Forgotten Realms with a few pages dedicated to the monsters that really make the adventures worth taking on in the first place. Beyond that, we have a guide to dragons and dragon-kin (such as the Dragonborn) which is obviously an important point to kick off anyone's understanding of one of the D's in the world's most popular roleplaying game.

The book contains scenes from classic locations from the

settings. These include Mithral Hall (a classic Dwarven stronghold beneath Frostpeak and part of the Spine of the World), the Yawning Portal (a pub in Waterdeep that is also the route to the Undermountain), and Wyrms Crossing (a double-bridge structure crossing a large river as part of an important trade route, near Baldur's Gate – i.e. the big smoke).

If all of that meant nothing to you, then it's likely you'll be able to work out a little bit of the classic Forgotten Realms lore while working out where everyone in the pictures are.

Take a look over the page – we've got a full spread to show off – and share it with the younger gamers at your table. Maybe it'll even spark the idea of getting a party together and slaying a few of those classic monsters, in good time. 🐉



THE YAWNING PORTAL

We begin our journey in the Yawning Portal, a bustling tavern in the city of Waterdeep. Popular among heroes resting up between quests or looking for their next adventure, it is famous for the deep well in the middle of the tavern, which leads into the Undermountain. Try not to fall in it just yet ...



HAVE A GO FOR
YOURSELF ON THE
NEXT PAGE!

WYRM'S CROSSING

Visitors to the city of Baldur's Gate must first make their way across the daunting Wyrms Crossing. This enormous stone bridge is built around Wyrms Rock, a small yet imposing island that rises far above the river and connects to the metropolitan city. It's famous for being home to the legendary mercenary group known as the Flaming Fist.



ULDER RAVENGARD



KENKU MONEYLENDER



PALADIN



WATER GENASI
SEA CAPTAIN



GNOME MONK





WHAT'S IN YOUR ATTIC?



GRAIL GAN



Do you have long-forgotten tabletop gold in your attic? Find out as we look for our grail games

Words by **Andrew Brassleay**

Board gaming's traditionally niche appeal and high production costs on some products means there are some quality, cherished items whose candle burns quickly.

These are the 'grail' games: the out-of-print desired objects from the hobby's past, requiring a personal quest or hunt to track down and, most importantly, to *play* – not just to gather dust on a shelf. Perhaps a great game was made with a board that wasn't built to last, ensuring that copies require incredible devotion for those who seek them. Or a game was simply released before its time, with unique mechanics, and gained only a limited run, overlooked in a mass market of now-outdated roll-and-move family games.

Are grail games always expensive and do all expensive games constitute grail games? Not exactly. Norm Hastings hosts the Board Game Museum YouTube channel and has collected hundreds of vintage games.

"I recorded an online auction on my YouTube site," says Hastings, "there was a guy that was selling about 300 games that were from the late 1800s. These games would often sell for over \$1,000 and there were a couple that sold for close to \$20,000. But it was mainly because they were collector's item, not because the gameplay was very good. It was mainly roll-and-move. To me, a grail game includes rarity, expense, experience, and nostalgia."

Ah yes, the hazy mists of time. Penelope Daniels co-runs Farpoint Toys, a vintage toy, comic and game store, and museum in Mays Landing, New Jersey in the US. She says collecting games from her childhood stemmed from "that nostalgic desire to gather lost memories," and that "reconnecting people with lost treasures is the most important part of what I do."

Luke Bradley, from vintage game YouTube channel *Down from the Attic* says other factors are involved in how tricky a desired game to track down and play is: "Not all grail games are rare, if you were to go onto eBay and search for *Voice of The Mummy* or the original *Fireball Island*, you'll find copies... they're just monstrously expensive.

"There are also games that were released in a certain geographic location only, games that only got US releases, certain

German companies like Ravensburger only release certain games in Germany. There are other games like Milton Bradley's *Flipsiders*, mini-games that folded into what looked like a cassette tape, that would've been regarded as disposable toys. Those have become very expensive and very collectable."

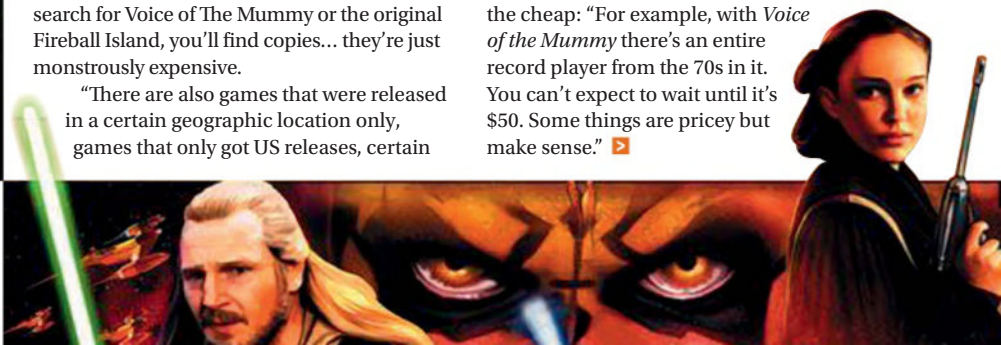
"I think the appeal of a lot of these games are the visuals: 3D boards, the huge size, just amazing to look at," adds Norm, "when people see these games, they are surprised that they are actually games. They look like centrepieces."

THE GAME OF YOUR DREAMS

So, how to go about getting that rare game of your dreams. Some games might have rare, collectible editions (such as *Catan*'s 3D edition) – but the actual experience that Norm alluded to isn't hard to come by and can be discovered on most high street. Additionally, Restoration Games has been on a mission to update some classic titles and bring them up to date with modern mechanics. This includes its rejig of Milton Bradley's aforementioned *Fireball Island* (copies of this original are now selling upwards of £200 on eBay) with *The Curse of Vul-Kar* – a far cheaper and much more entertaining version. It's also bought MB's 1980s' mega-expensive *The Dark Tower* kicking and screaming into the app-filled 21st century. Also, original copies of *Hero Quest* might sell for above £100 on eBay, but Hasbro has bought it and its expansions back to high street. Therefore, if you're just desperate to *play* the game... well, your journey ends here.

But what about uncovering the relics that haven't garnered this modernising treatment? Bernardo Rodriguez runs *Tabletop Island* on YouTube and has reviewed more than a hundred vintage games. He says the key is to be patient – and know which items will never be a real bargain.

"Don't give in to hype prices," Bernardo suggests – but does add a note of caution that some games will never realistically be sold on the cheap: "For example, with *Voice of the Mummy* there's an entire record player from the 70s in it. You can't expect to wait until it's \$50. Some things are pricey but make sense." ▶



WHAT'S IN YOUR ATTIC?

Luke echoes the need for persistence: “Just because you can’t find a certain game now doesn’t mean you’ll never find it. Rare games can surface in the most unlikely places, charity shops, yard sales and car-boot sales, house clearance, even antiques fairs, it’s just having a keen eye. I know which games I’m after and which interest me. I’ve read reviews, heard from friends on games I’d be interested in. I know now I’m wanting to collect good games, I’m not interested in having a collection of bad or just OK games.”

“Grail games are all subjective,” Luke adds. “What’s difficult for me to get here in the UK might not be as difficult to find in the US.” So, what’s his advice to get around such geographical issues? Build your own worldwide network.

“I know Bernardo from Tabletop Island struggles to find certain Waddingtons games there because they are British, whereas I have no trouble finding them. We’ve both helped each other in the past acquire games that we’ve been struggling to find, and send each other listings we’ve spotted that we know the other is after. I think having gaming friends around the world certainly edges your bets at finding games you’re after at fair prices.”

And some prices are fairer than others – and sometimes gold can be struck through sheer luck and the joy of “the thrill of the hunt”, as Luke explains, “there’s always someone who lists something without a clue to its value. Those are my white whales!”

As far as other tips on where to look, apart from the obvious eBay, Penelope says, “I belong to a number of Facebook vintage gaming groups and have found obscure things there as often as anywhere else, usually for more reasonable prices because they’re coming from other like-minded collectors.”

There’s another good reason to find great games from the past: from an environmental perspective why shell out on a costly Kickstarter that add more plastic into the world when there are retro jewels that can be saved from the attic-to-landfill journey?

But perhaps the most important aspect of your own treasure hunt is not to let it lead to your own financial ruin. Find a way so you never pay over the odds. As Luke says, “I only ever pay what I’m comfortable paying for a game. There are games I would love to own, but I refuse to pay the price they command. It’s too much. Only ever pay what you feel the game is worth to you – remember, we’re talking about pieces of cardboard and plastic here.”

GRAILS ATTAINED AND

Our contributors on how successful they’ve been on their treasure hunts.

WHICH GAMES IN YOUR COLLECTION WERE YOU DESPERATE TO HAVE BUT WERE A QUEST TO GET?

Penelope: When I was young, my family moved into a smaller house. Almost everything I didn’t need on a daily basis or donate went into temporary storage with a family friend. That “temporary” situation became nearly permanent when we fell out of contact. Of course, my board games were in there! As the years went on, I was desperate to recapture the good times I’d had, but couldn’t get to my games! So, I started rebuying copies where I could. *Elixir* was geared toward a slightly younger crowd than *D&D* itself. It had fun art, a fantasy plot and neat play mechanics – you’re a wizard, racing to be the first to uncover the recipe for a magical ‘elixir of life’ and brew it before other players can, all while being either helped or

hindered by random encounters. Finding a copy took me a while. I’m happy to say I’ve recovered 99% of my childhood stuff from that old storage unit, but I didn’t see any of those things for over 20 years. Being reconnected with a copy – and then later with my original copy – of that game was a big deal to me.

Norm: *Dark Tower* was one. I had to wait about a year before I finally found one at a decent price. I had to make a couple of caveats, such as getting 3D printed pieces to save some money, but I didn’t mind.

Luke: Three games I struggled to find were one-year-only and US-only releases. *Superstition*, *Mystery Mansion* and *Back Off! Buzzard*, all by Milton Bradley. US-exclusive releases are easy to spot, the MB logo generally has the slogan “key to fun”. *Back Off! Buzzard* in particular was tough to find because of the motorised components. Finding a copy in England, complete and working? Next to impossible... but I did it. It still needed repairs, but I have got it working.

Mystery Mansion, I’d been after for a



ASPIRED

while since getting *Electronic Mystery Mansion* by Parker Brothers some years ago. Lot of parts to the game, which makes finding a complete one difficult. Superstition is a rare game in itself. I was lucky to find a seller in the UK.

WHICH GAMES HAVE ELUDED YOU? WHAT'S THE APPEAL OF THEM AND WHY ARE THEY DIFFICULT TO FIND?

Penelope: I'm looking for copies of the *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the *Willow* board game, both by Parker Brothers. Both of those movies have different board game versions from other publishers (Kenner and Tor, respectively) that are more common and come up for sale more often. I also love licensed games that tie in to my other favourites (*Clash of the Titans*, *Krull*, *Star Wars*).

Luke: *Broadsides & Boarding Parties* is this beautiful-looking pirate strategy game with these two enormous galleon builds either

side of the board. It has a ton of miniatures. This was a one-year-release game so finding one with all the bits and in good condition is expensive. For years I've been hunting for an affordable copy of *It from the Pit* – again a one-year release, mechanical components, so finding one working and complete is tough. I've toyed with the idea of getting a broken one and repairing it. It can be a good way to save money.

Bernardo: The Party Joy Bandai board games. They were only sold in a small area in Japan around the 1980s so I've been translating a bunch of them. This makes finding them complete difficult because not many were made or they got damaged. The appeal for me is the history and the unique design mechanisms. The dream would be to design some board games and I feel these games hold design ideas that haven't been used since.

OTHER OUT-OF-PRINT GAMES YOU'RE INTRIGUED BY?

Norm: *Mr. President* used the box as a ballot box, so you can cast votes and try to win the presidency.

Luke: *Enchanted Palace*. It's got massive 3D components. There are battery-powered wands that interact with the board. Ideal's Haunted House is monstrously rare and expensive, but I'm intrigued by its mechanisms, locking doors and spring-loaded traps.

Bernardo: *Tower of the Wizard King*. That game's table presence is amazing – this awesome-looking kingdom that, when you place your player miniatures in the castle, the wizard's power can change it into another character with a new set of abilities. ▢



GOLDEN GRAILS

The pick of the best-of-the-rest of entertaining-but-hellishly-hard-to-get-hold-of games – and how much you should pay for them.

TORNADO REX

Simple gameplay but all the more fun for it. Rex – who has more than a bit of a nod to Looney Tunes' Taz – is represented by a spinning prism unleashed at the top of a 3D-mountain board. Players placed their pieces on squares strategically in the hope that their counters are squirrelled away from Rex enough to prevent them being splattered back down the mountain. The game's unique mechanics, its board's fragility and its limited early-90s run – following what was clearly an unsuccessful attempt at a TV tie-in – all contribute to an eye-watering price of above £200. If you can find a copy under this, it's a steal.

STAR WARS: THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT

OK, George Lucas's initial 1999 prequel might not quite have matched fans' expectations with its trade dispute plot and bizarre sidekick

(though this author remains a 'Jar-Jar was a Sith' truther), but perhaps the best thing that came out of it was this adaptation, based on the movie's climactic scenes. Not one but four battles are covered in the gameplay: the pitch battle between Gungan and droid forces; the Jedi duo Vs Darth Maul lightsabre duel; the spaceship gunfight and Prince Amidala's attempt to storm her captured palace. The latter take place on a massive three-storey contraption. The going rate for such complex, varied mechanics, the 155 plastic miniatures and Star Wars official product-ness? Anywhere above £400.

ALIENS: ANOTHER GLORIOUS DAY IN THE CORPS

Grail games don't have to be old. This award-winning 2020 release of marine vs space bugs in the deserted colony of Hadley's Hope, based on James Cameron's 1986 movie sequel, ended its retail run in 2021. Who knows, publishers Gale Force Nine might still decide on another, but until then this tense survival epic allowing you to experience being a marine in interstellar peril usually sells for anything above £100 on auction sites. And that's

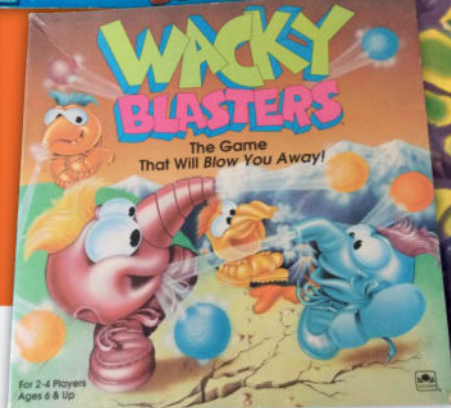
even before considering any of its multiple expansions.

CRASH CANYON

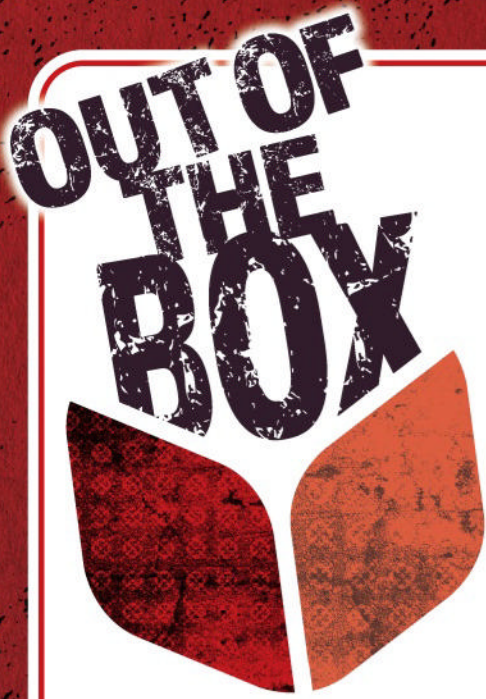
Huge and easily destructible 3D board? Yup. Collectible toy factor with Micro Machine cars used as playing pieces? Oh yes. Limited 1989 print run? Full house! Crash Canyon's gameplay might be lighter than a copy of Zoo Ball, but it was unique, intriguing and fun enough for this to be a highly sought-after prize. Its US-only publication – and the fact the instructions suggested using actual water to fill hazards – are other factors why rare complete copies sell upward of £130.

WACKY BLASTERS

Silly. Very silly. A 1990 kids' game that will have an appeal for tipsy grown-ups as a time-filler at a games' night. Weave a puffball through a trap-filled 3D board with the help of toys Squeaky, Corky, Schnoz or Wheezer – squeeze them to get a blast of air through their noise, thus sending the ball – hopefully – closer to its goal. Rare, but can be picked up for £60 if you want to try out a unique mechanic. 🎮







NO RULE

Our round up of the good, the bad and the ugly of non-gaming, nearly-gaming, sort-of-gaming stuff

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

MEGA CONSTRUX POKEMON JUMBO PIKACHU, MATTEL



Yes, everyone's favourite electric mouse is available as a MegaConstrux set, this one proudly claiming to be 32cm tall. This is, nearly, as tall as the original Pokémon Pokedex officially records (40cm). While this jumbo version of Pikachu is pretty cute, it does require a bit of brick-building nous to make this mouse. The instructions are decent, but you'll have to be able to imagine some aspects of the model in your mind to get the pieces right, and the brick removal tool is not going to win you any gym badges. The model is possible however, so you can train your Pikachu into whatever position you prefer. The 8+ age range might be a bit ambitious at the bottom end, and it's likely a couple of evenings worth of building (our Senior Brick Testing Professional clocked in at 9-10 hours). Still, worth the effort for a pretty big Pikachu.



£52

GET IT? YES

**BIG
MOUSE
NEEDS
NOUS**

D&D ICONS OF THE REALMS: ASTRAL SEA BATTLE MAT, WIZKIDS

This, frankly huge, battle mat is an odd one. How does one represent the nothingness between dimensions? It's a tricky ask. The answer is that it's sort of white with some cosmic splotches and swirls throughout. And this is actually a recommendation – a useful battle mat for any number of occasions, whether that's outer space, a snowy field, or any other liminal space your characters end up slipping into. Surprisingly good for players who are a little too literal about the props the DM throws down.

**ON A
ROLL**



£60

GET IT? YES

RPG STARTER KIT, Q-WORKSHOP

A decent starting gift for someone beginning their roleplaying game journey? Or a vague box of Tolkien-adjacent nonsense? The latter sadly. A set of dice, a notebook, a pen and level tracker (of which the probable use of is hardest to determine) are all fine – but throw up more questions than answers. What is it all exactly for which isn't dealt with using a character sheet, a fistful of dice to share and a good one shot.



£28

GET IT? NO

**STARTER
FOR
NONE**



S REQUIRED



FINAL GIRL: MINIATURES BOX SERIES 1, VAN RYDER

The horror-movie sometimes solo hit that is *Final Girl* deserves a bit more table presence. While there's no need for it to go to the scale of Van Ryder's other classic *Detective: City of Angels* these miniatures (covering all of season one) give you a lot of girl for your cash. And the killers of course. Great for those who like a little unnecessary bling in their murder games.



£25

GET IT? YES



FINAL
REDUCTIONS

MARVEL SPIDER-MAN: 20 SIDED DICE, THE OP

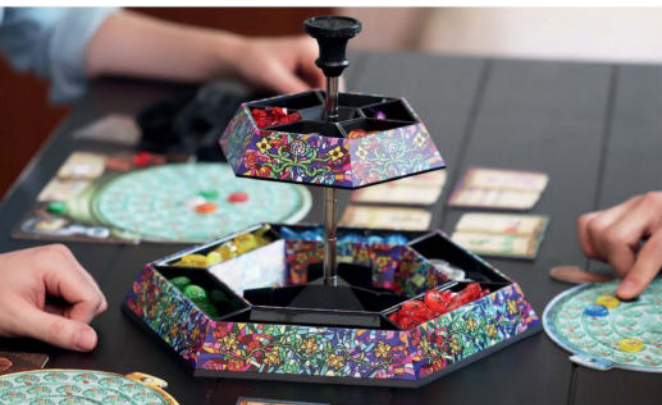
A larger-than-your-average-spider sized dice for fans the once-bitten-fights-crime superhero. Here the 20 on the dice is a Spider-man style spider logo, and the colours really pop because the bright blue and strong red feel like they've been whipped off the pages of the comics. The only question is, why isn't a D8?



£11

GET IT? MAYBE

ADVENTURES IN STAINED GLASS: TOKEN SESAME, CLOUD PUNCHER GAMES



Board games are sometimes so filled with things that should be 'placed in piles within reach of all players' that it is laughable. Unless your gaming group consists of inspector gadget and Reed Richards it's likely you're not going to be able to complete that set up instruction. Unless you give Token Sesame a go. A modular approach to token storage, you can go for personal trays, or even a multi-tiered 'afternoon tea' tray option. The modular tier system means you can fit

everything you need for *Ticket to Ride* in the smaller set, while the extension can sort you out for token heavy games like *Betrayal* easily. Tidy tokens, tidy mind. The token holder is available in a number of different themes too, if stained glass isn't your vibe.



£30

GET IT? YES

NIGHT AT THE MOVIES 100 PIECE JIGSAW PUZZLE, BIG POTATO



The jigsaw puzzle had a big resurgence during the various lockdowns of the past few years. There's nothing quite as chill as quietly doing a jigsaw puzzle together – it more or less demands a quiet and contemplative air. Big Potato's offer is, of course, a fun twist on this classic night in. This puzzle is not only a great way to spend an evening, but also a kind of quiz – in this case for movie references.

SOME
ASSEMBLY
REQUIRED



£15

GET IT? YES

WHAT'S IN A GAMER? DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

We all know games are good for us, but in what way? Each month Tim Clare untangles the science and philosophy behind what makes games good

Words by **Tim Clare**

At the start of the invasion of Ukraine, as Russian tanks rolled south towards Kyiv, a group of Ukrainian soldiers stood at a barricade at midnight playing draughts. Specifically, they were playing shashki – also known as Russian draughts – arguably the game's most dynamic variant, where pieces can capture forwards or backwards and kings can move any distance. More specifically, their playing pieces were Molotov cocktails.

It might sound an odd time to set up a board game – the temperature was below freezing, they had use electric torches to see the improvised board, and somewhere to the north the full motorised weight of a global superpower was thundering towards them. Certainly, it puts into perspective all those times we've turned down a games night because we're 'a little busy'. On the other hand, it was the *perfect* time.

It will come as no great revelation to any adult that life can be tricky. Trickiness, in fact, is probably life's default state. Problems might be the world's most reliable source of renewable energy, bubbling up endlessly like snot. If things seem to be going well you've probably forgotten something.

I'm joking, of course. Life is also abundant with surprise and pleasure and bright blossoming wonders, but it's true that, as humans, we have a lot to contend with – some of us more than others. Psychologists and psychiatrists and, before them, philosophers and theologians have devoted whole lifetimes trying to figure out strategies to mitigate the vagaries of fortune and the emotions that arise from the difficulties we face. Cognitive reframing, psychopharmacological interventions, dream analysis, dietary changes and strict self-denial are just some of the solutions that have been proposed.

But one tactic that has got a bit of a bad rap over the years – one that I'd now like to go to bat for and attempt to rehabilitate – is a very simple one: distraction.

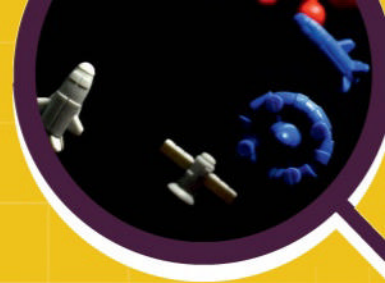
In psychology, the tendency to distract oneself from unpleasant emotions or thoughts has traditionally been viewed as maladaptive. Therapeutic techniques are all about facing up to your problems. Mental health is axiomatically about clear-sighted awareness of the things that are making you unhappy. Most of the time, we think of distractions as negative things we want to eliminate.

Distract comes the Latin *trahere*, from *traho* meaning 'drag' or 'pull'. Thus to be 'dis-tracted' is literally to be dragged in several directions. But when

we choose the distraction – a game, for example – rather than a malevolent force pulling us out of the moment, it can function more like an anchor, tethering us in safe waters.

Recent studies have challenged the conventional notion that distraction is necessarily bad for mental health. While emotional numbness, 'zoning out' and habitual mind-wandering in response to stress can be what researchers call a 'maladaptive disengagement strategy' that leads to poor long-term outcomes, there is mounting evidence that not all distractions are created equal. Choosing to actively pursue engaging leisure activities like tabletop games has been shown to – according to a 2020 paper by Christian Waugh, Elaine Shing and R. Michael Furr in the journal *Anxiety, Stress & Coping* – 'predict improved life satisfaction and coping self-efficacy... and may also promote personal transformation.' The authors go so far as to say that disaster survivors often use simple leisure distractions as a way of coping with the early stages of recovery.

The paper makes a key distinction that accounts for the discrepancy between previous findings on distraction and more positive contemporary perspectives. Clearly, if you're facing a very important exam, your rent is late, or someone in your life is going through a hard time and needs your support, it's not an effective strategy to head down your local game shop and bash out fifty games of





Imperial Settlers while ignoring your phone. This, Waugh and his co-authors argue, is not distraction but avoidance.

The soldiers in our opening example weren't merely sitting at home playing shashki, pretending that the invasion wasn't happening. Rather, they had erected a full tank barricade north of the city, blocking the road. They had M14s and Soviet assault rifles slung over their shoulders, ready for use. They had assembled twenty-four Molotov cocktails.

But the invasion hadn't yet reached them. (and, as it turned out, the tanks never would, bogged down in winter mud and starved of fuel by attacks along strung-out supply lines) If they had remained poised in tense, alert silence, scanning the night horizon for signs of the enemy, they would have rapidly become anxious, exhausted, and unable to effectively defend their position.



The distraction acknowledged that, in that moment, they had done all they could do. There was no benefit to endlessly gaming out the possible futures that might await them in a day, a week, a month. They could not take additional positive action to influence those outcomes. Better to let their focus rest on an enjoyable bonding activity that took their minds off the cold and the potentially life-threatening struggle ahead.

I've written before about Johan Huizinga's

famous contention that games take place within a 'magic circle', a special space where the ordinary rules and concerns of everyday life no longer apply. If the circle exists, then its magic is temporary. Playing a game does not dissolve our problems, but rather offers us a stay of execution.

A 2012 study of hospitality employees found that when leisure activities were used as a way of trying to forget that a problem existed, they led to an increased likelihood of 'job dissatisfaction and diminished well-being'. By contrast, when leisure activities were used as a 'planned breather' to rest and restore energy, participants generally reported a reduction in stress and better long-term outcomes. These activities were deliberate, scheduled events rather than, for example, tinkering with an app to avoid a task that needed to be done, and they helped people feel refreshed so they could deal more effectively with the problems they faced.

In addition, the authors argued that leisure activities where a subject feels a degree of control increase feelings of self-determination – that is, how much power you have over your life. This sense of power – what the psychologist Albert Bandura called 'self-efficacy' – can provide a buffer against the negative impact of stress and also encourages us to consider our problems from different angles and look for solutions. After all, we're not very motivated to try to improve our situation when we feel like we're powerless. Putting ourselves in situations where we feel some sort of control encourages us to be proactive in other scenarios too.

Good board games are problem machines. Crucially, they give us just the right balance of problems and control for us to feel stretched but not helpless. When this works particularly well, we may even experience the pleasurable, empowering state of intense focus that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called 'flow'.

When we engage with games purposefully, taking our leisure time as a serious, non-negotiable building block of our wellbeing, a mere 'distraction' becomes an act of regeneration, a well-earned rest break, and a training ground for future victories. We're not avoiding our problems. We're building our capacity to engage with them head on. 🎲



“One tactic that has got a bit of a bad rap over the years – one that I'd now like to go to bat for and attempt to rehabilitate – is a very simple one: distraction”

WHAT IS THE PRICE OF POWER?

We attempt to take control of Europe, again, in this new translation of the video game strategy classic

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Ah, the takeover of Europe, a classic theme for board games and the wars that inspire them. A massive clash of peoples over a relatively small chunk of the world is what it's all about it seems. Many readers might know the Europa Universalis name from the series of video games by Paradox, released in 2001, but they may not know that these games were originally based off a boardgame series by Philippe Thibaut. The Board Game Geek page begins by describing that game from 1993 as 'a monster wargame of diplomacy, territorial expansion, trade, military technology, economic development, and war where you play the

part of kings as you relive 300 years of world history.'

Because, of course, simply having the genre of these kind of games being called 'Grand Strategy' simply isn't enough. Since then, the popular game series has spawned many further outings – there being a total of five Europa Universalis video games in the line.

And now we head back to the world of tabletop. Eivind Vetlesen and Aegir games are having a modern stab at the cardboard Europa Universalis experience. The new game looks to be a tidier takeover of Europe by your desired faction, with a beautiful board, fresh design and layout. We join the designer to find out what the real price of power is.

Hello! Can you introduce yourself? How did you get into gaming?

Hello! My name is Eivind Vetlesen. I am 42 years old, from Oslo, Norway, father of two, and I am the game designer of *Europa Universalis: The Price of Power*. Prior to designing board games I worked for many years as a self-employed illustrator and graphic designer after completing my Bachelor's degree in Illustration at The Arts University at Bournemouth in 2007. I also have a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Oslo, where my main field of study was History, and I often half-jokingly say that I got those two seemingly unrelated degrees just so that I could design historical board games.



I have had a great passion for strategy board games, miniature games and RPGs ever since I was introduced to the Swedish RPG *Drakar och Demoner* (recently in a new version on Kickstarter, in English called *Dragonbane*) as an eight year old kid. Almost right from the start, I started adapting rules and toying with the idea of making my own games, but nothing much came out of it. It wasn't really until I was offered the chance to get the game *Kampen om Norge* (The Battle for Norway) published, in 2012, that I started thinking about game design as something I could do professionally. In the last few years I have gradually become a full-time board game designer and publisher at Aegir Games.

What is Europa Universalis?

Europa Universalis: The Price of Power is the board game adaption of the highly acclaimed and award-winning video game series, *Europa Universalis*, by Paradox Interactive.

Each player plays as one of the major powers of Europe, trying to score the most Prestige by the end of the game. It is essentially a 4X, grand strategy board game that lets you create your version of 370 years of European history in the Early Modern Era, spanning from the Renaissance to the Napoleonic Wars. Your aim is to make your empire thrive and develop domestically, as well as expanding it through the means of exploration, diplomacy and warfare.

The game comes with a number of scenarios with varying setups and different playable realms, suitable for player counts from one to six. The solo mode that we created together with Dávid Turczí has some really sophisticated bots that will provide a real challenge for solo players, but these bots can also be thrown into the mix in multiplayer games.

How do we play? What's the main hook or loop of the game?

The game is played in Rounds that represent roughly 20–25 years of history. In the main phase of the Round, the Action Phase, players take turns performing one Action at a time until they have spent all their Monarch Power or decide to pass.

Monarch Power is the main resource of the game – it is divided into three categories: Administrative, Diplomatic, and Military Power. The Monarch Power cubes are basically your action points, and you spend these cubes to perform various Actions that are related to the type of Power that you are spending. The fourth resource is money, or Ducats, which is also needed for several things.

At some point during the Action Phase, each player has to pick an Event card from a display of Events. Each Event has a historical basis, but it is much in the hands of the players how its effects are implemented, as most Events offer one or more choices to the player playing it. Once an Event has been played, a new Event is revealed in the display.

Players interact with each other all the time, directly, via informal and formal diplomatic agreements or through military conflicts, and indirectly, via competition for Milestones and by picking Events that affect other players.

During the game, players mainly score Prestige for completing personal Missions (from a deck specific to the realm they are playing), for achieving the public Milestones that all players compete for, and from researching various Ideas (representing technological and philosophical progress). At the end of the game each player will also score Prestige based on the extent of their empire.


And what is the price of power?

The price of being in charge one of Europe's great nations is that there is a lot of things to care of – maintaining relations, defending against enemies, handling domestic rebellions, managing expenses, dealing with

events and so on. You will also soon learn that being perceived as the most powerful or dangerous realm will make you a natural target for your opponents' plots – if you overextend, you might leave yourself exposed.

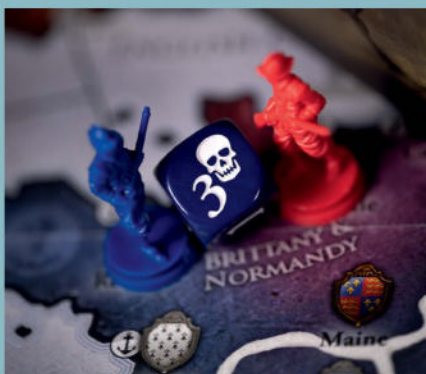
What kind of historical events do we expect to recreate, and what do we expect to take a different path through?

The Kickstarter Deluxe edition of the game comes with as many as 221 Event cards (110 in the Standard edition), all of which are inspired by or directly based upon real historical events of that time period, so there are quite a lot of them. But these events quite often will pan out quite differently from what they did in real life, depending on how the players interact with them and what the current situation is in the game.

It depends on which scenario you are playing, but you can expect to see France and England fighting in the Hundred Years' 



EUROPA UNIVERSALIS: THE PRICE OF POWER



War and Castile trying to unite Spain, as well as discovering America. You will see Austria trying to keep in control of the Holy Roman Empire, and you will often see the major powers clashing over historical battlegrounds like Italy, the Low Countries, and the Balkans. There are also some cards called Power Struggles that you can optionally use to further encourage historical conflicts like the Italian Wars and the 30 Years' War.

The further into the game you get, the likelier it is that you deviate from the historical path of course. But major cataclysmic events in history, like the Reformation or the French Revolution (although it might appear elsewhere), are going to affect the game in one way or another.



For those who have played the video games, what will they find here that they like the most?

The board game is the truest adaption of the video game that we could make within what we thought were reasonable limits. We made this board game with the hardcore fans of the video game in mind, front and centre, and we also involved that community heavily in the development of the game. Those who have played the video games will recognise many concepts in the board game right off the bat, as wherever it made sense, these have been derived from similar concepts in the video games.

Like the video game, the board game is a great sandbox that allows for different play styles, whether you enjoy waging wars or taking a more diplomatic approach. It

is grand, epic, and modular, like its digital counterpart. Players can easily create their own scenarios for the game, and we have provided some guidelines for those who wish to do so. Hardcore fans of the video game series might also appreciate the Glory for Ulm solo experience, which is based on a legendary comic from the Paradox online forums that took on a life of its own.

What are your top tips for 'world' domination in the game?

Manage your resources carefully and your opponent's even more carefully. Don't make too many enemies at the same time. Pay attention to which of the public Milestones you can potentially claim before the other players, as there is a lot of Prestige to be scored from those. If you can balance all of these aspects, you stand a good chance of winning.

What's coming next for you?

Most likely, there will be an expansion for *Europa Universalis: The Price of Power* in the not too distant future, and we have also just started working on the board game adaption of *Victoria 3*, another Paradox Interactive title, which Aegir Games will publish together with PSC Games. We have some other projects in the works too. 🎮



IN ISSUE 76

ON SALE 25 FEBRUARY 2023

IS AI ART CHANGING GAMING FOREVER?

We talk to creators using Artificial Intelligence to make games, and those who swear they never will

PLUS

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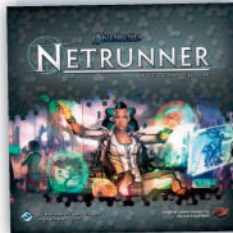
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2012

Collectable Gaming
Forever ChangedWords by **Matthew Vernal**

Take that Mayan Calendar! As well as surviving another foretold apocalyptic date, 2012 also saw Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee, the 'better than anyone expected' London 2012 Olympics and the Box Office Busting team-up film that has now defined modern cinema, *The Avengers* (amusingly referred to as *Avengers Assemble* in the UK so it wouldn't be confused with the 1960's TV show, look that gem up when you can.)

As the UK embraced superheroes and superathletes, we saw a healthy selection of industry-defining releases that would change the course of tabletop gaming. Join us as we look back at 2012!

**ANDROID:
NETRUNNER**

It wasn't that *Netrunner* was a new game; the asymmetric collectable card game designed by the legendary

Richard Garfield first released in 1996. Nor was it the debut of the *Android* universe or the idea of 'Living Card Games' both having been developed and trademarked by Fantasy Flight Games for previous products. It was the infusion of a fascinating card game system, a jaw-droppingly cyberpunk world and one of the biggest shake ups in the CCG industry that made *Android: Netrunner* take the world by storm.

Whilst the core game design was relatively unchanged from its nineties predecessor (players would either be a Runner looking to build an effective hacking system to indulge in some corporate espionage or a Corporation looking to complete secret projects as soon as they can) FFG added extra flavour by theming the Corps into four distinctive organisations (such as the multimedia moguls of NBN) and Runners as either anarchists, criminals or bored supernerds who wanna change the world. The Living Card Game model massively changed how people viewed card games; instead of buying randomised booster packs, you would get expansion packs with guaranteed contents, letting players buy with confidence and ensuring the game's competitive scene could grow without a financial limit.

By reducing the barrier for entry and consistently releasing new and invigorating expansions, the game was a massive hit for nearly a decade. Sadly, the licence was refused renewal in 2018, leaving FFG with a wonderful world but no legal means of using the *Netrunner* mechanics. However, in an act of true cyberpunk rebellion, the system lives on today through a freely distributed fan community release, known as *NISEI*. Fight on, you glorious runners.

**STAR WARS: X-WING
MINIATURES GAME**

Not satisfied with changing the landscape of CCGs, Fantasy Flight decided to also flip the entire wargaming industry on its head. Inspired by "simultaneous" action systems like *Wings of War*, *X-Wing* is a dynamic dogfighting miniatures game, where players battle for space supremacy as they slide their ships across the table along pre-selected routes, before actions being revealed and deadly dice rolled.

Each round would begin with players choosing a speed and manoeuvre for their ships. Once chosen, these actions would be done in order of a pilot's skill, with better pilots being able to seize the initiative and launch an attack before the enemy could fly out of the way. Harder moves would cause pilots to gain stress, limiting future actions and making them easier to predict.

By releasing each pre-assembled and painted miniature with its own rules and array of upgrade cards, *X-Wing* trampled utterly over the sacrosanct core of many wargaming systems, replacing it with a fluid and easy to modify system of cards whilst also selling highly affordable miniatures for one of the most merchandised properties in existence.

This one-two punch of exciting mechanics and good looking minis catapulted *X-Wing* to global popularity, leading to competing systems such as two *Attack Wing* systems developed by Wizkids set in *Star Trek* and, bizarrely, a fantasy "dragon fighting" game for *D&D*.

X-Wing swept an array of awards across release, whilst we've not had a new release since 2021, it's fair to say this starfighter simulator has more than earned its place in tabletop history.



2012 may have been a massive year for gaming, but 2013 still found ways to

THE GREAT WAVE OF JAPANESE GAMES

2012 saw many great titles come from the Land of the Rising Sun, as the microgame industry that had been slowly cultivating in Japan exploded out into the wider gaming community.

The biggest of which, designed by Seiji Kenai, was *Love Letter*. This charming minimalist card game had players draw a card, then play a card



from one of the two options available to them, attempting to either kick other players out of the round or cling to the highest value card available. First brought over to the West as a light edition to a series of European Fantasy themed titles known as “*Tempest*,” the game rapidly became popular and reskinned with various trademarked properties

such as *Marvel*, *Batman*, *Lord of the Rings* and many, MANY more, all of which have had design work from Kenai and lovingly brought to life again and again.

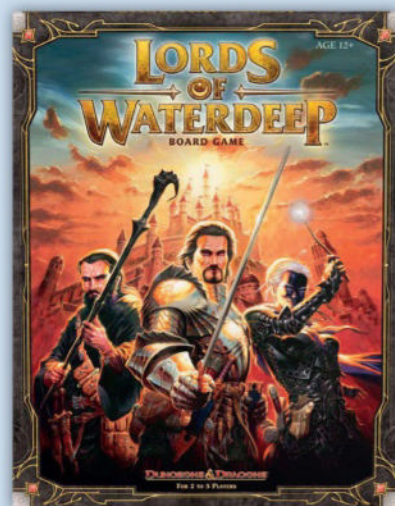
Another smash hit game with several expansions and even a Legacy-style spin off is the city-building, dice rolling *Machi Koro* (which literally translates to “Dice Town.”) Players are attempting to build their own little city, complete with all things any cool city needs, such as a train station, shopping centre, amusement park and airport. Players start their turns rolling dice, with different business cards that they (or in some cases other players) own generating cash, that could be spent on buying more cards or investing in those game-winning developments. With a literal sequel released last year, this little push-your-luck, city-planning game is definitely here to stay.

Lastly but no means least, we have Hisashi Hayashi (of *Yokohama* and *String Railways* fame) releasing their deck-building/area-control hybrid *Trains*. Players would be assembling a rail network connecting the biggest cities in Japan, investing in new trains to spread further and dominate the board. This fusion of two beloved mechanics earned the game several awards and also led to spiritual sequels fittingly titled *Planes* (2014) and *Automobiles* (2016.)

As these titles garnered praise and catapulted product sales, we would begin to see even more titles coming from outside of Europe/America, with Japan leading the way on how smaller games could still make a big difference to the world of gaming.



LORDS OF WATERDEEP



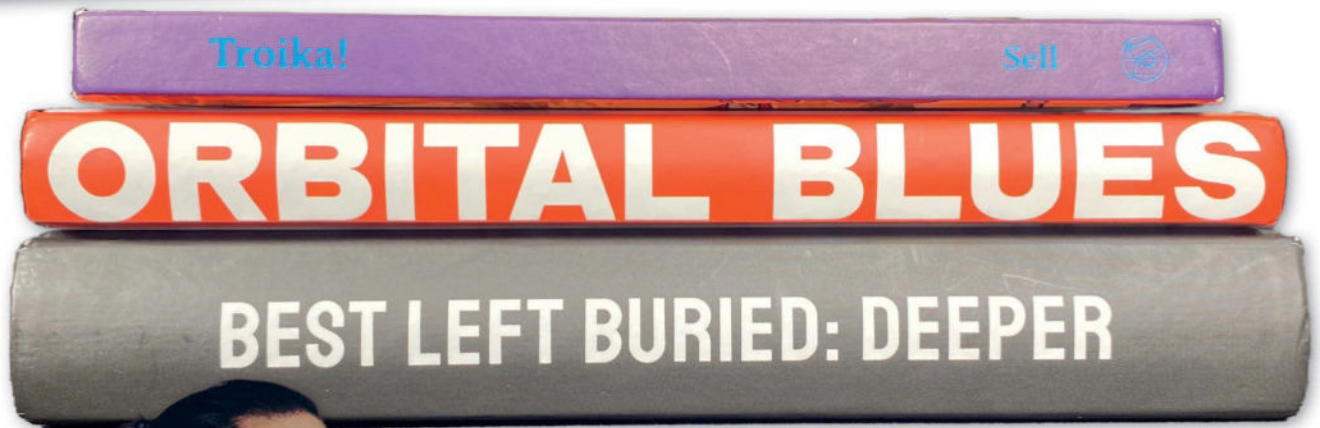
The term ‘gateway game’ often gets thrown about to describe party games or light hearted family titles that show players a world outside of Monopoly. *Lords of Waterdeep* wowed players by encouraging fans of *D&D* that there were other ways to have fun on the tabletop that didn’t have to involve some Games Master investing hours of their time preparing roleplaying sessions.

In this worker placement game set in the titular fantasy metropolis, players represent secretive lords looking to push their agendas through various factions onto the world of Faerûn. Rather than being the heroes going on quests, you would instead be recruiting Fighters, Wizards and other adventurous types, earning prestige as you helped protect the city of Waterdeep, whilst also earning gold to further invest in new buildings (i.e. new worker placement spots) that would earn you further victory points.

By showing a different side to roleplaying worlds with a crunchy yet accessible system, *Lords of Waterdeep* opened many minds to the possibility of modern board games, seeing enough success to receive an expansion in 2013 and still seeing print today.

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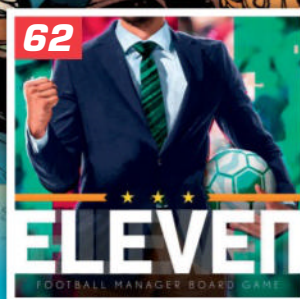


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PLAY



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SHOULD YOU PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY | YES | MAYBE | NO



AHOY

Fish 'n' ships

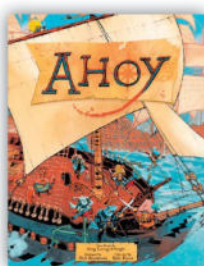
Designer: Greg Loring-Albright | Publisher: Leder Games



On first inspection through the spyglass, *Ahoy* is *Root*-on-boats. It is, after all, an asymmetrical battle-driven title from Leder Games featuring fun, scrappy illustrations of anthropomorphic animals by Leder's in-house artist Kyle Ferrin. But instead of cats, birds and mice fighting over a forest, players here take to the waves and ready their cannons in the form of pirate sea creatures. And that's only where the differences start.

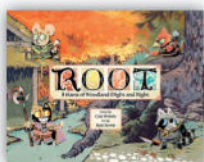
Anyone who's played Cole Wehrle's *Root* will know it is far more complex and challenging than it looks. In contrast, Greg Loring-Albright's *Ahoy* turns out to be a far simpler and more accessible game. It has already been lauded for being a great entry-level asymmetrical experience, and with good reason.

When set up for four, two participants will be playing an area-controller (as the domineering Bluefin Squadron or the slippery Mollusk [sic] Union), and the other two a pick-up-and-deliver game (as the Smugglers, a pair of factions that differ only in their player colour). Everyone's out to gain fame on the high seas as they battle and explore a deeply attractive modular tile-laid map, but while the Bluefin Squadron (sharks) and Mollusk Union (er, molluscs) achieve this through securing islands which yield points at each round's end, the



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Pocket guides
- ▶ 12 Region tiles
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 4 Flagship figures
- ▶ 10 Patrol figures
- ▶ 3 Stronghold figures
- ▶ Cutter figure
- ▶ Gunship figure
- ▶ 17 Action dice
- ▶ 11 Wealth dice
- ▶ 2 Battle dice
- ▶ 30 Market cards
- ▶ 12 Plan cards
- ▶ First Player card
- ▶ 4 Aid cards
- ▶ 25 Damage tokens
- ▶ 20 Gold tokens
- ▶ 20 Comrade tokens
- ▶ Fame track
- ▶ 4 Fame markers
- ▶ 4 Pledge markers
- ▶ 4 Reward markers



two Smugglers must ferry cargo from island to island, grabbing their points as they go.

However, everyone is very much playing the same game. A dice-placement game, to be precise, where actions are determined by rolls that can thankfully be mitigated with the spending of coins (one gold per pip raised or lowered). Furthermore, the value of regions increases with every successful Smuggler delivery, meaning the sharks and molluscs must always keep an eye on what the Smugglers are up to; meanwhile the Smugglers must be careful not to throw too much wealth their conquering rivals' way as a by-product of their own achievements... Although, they can secretly pledge their gains to either the Squadron or the Union, depending on who they think will gain the upper fin come the final reckoning and, in so doing, potentially snatch a win from under their snouts/beaks.

While both Smugglers play the exact same way, there are significant play-style differences between the Bluefin Squadron and the Mollusk Union. The sharks are all about aggression and focused consolidation, leaving patrols in their flagship's wake and establishing strongholds on the

choicest locations. They also have one more action die than the other factions, allowing them to land an extra blow each round. The molluscs, meanwhile, find their strength in numbers, scattering squishy comrades across the map. They get a small deck of Plan cards, which give them the greatest tactical range, allowing for surprise moves and specialised extra ships.

It is a joyful, thrilling game to play, even if things can get a bit vicious from time to time. The rules are intuitive and a breeze to learn whichever faction you choose, while the game quickly reveals depths that belie its slim box, straightforward rules and cute graphics. Additionally, whether you resolve to master a particular faction or determine to flip between shark, smuggler and mollusc, *Ahoy* will certainly endure on your tabletop, more than earning its place there, again and again. 🍷

DAN JOLIN

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

A fantastic, easy-to-learn asymmetrical game with huge potential for broad appeal. Our only complaint is that you're denied some of its charms with just two players, owing to the omission of the smugglers.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ROOT...

Think of it as *Root*'s simpler, more accessible, more watery cousin.

SAN FRANCISCO

San Fran by tram

Designer: Reiner Knizia | Publisher: Rebel Studio



With hundreds of titles up his sleeve, not to mention multiple awards, Reiner Knizia is something of a magician when it comes to designing successful board games. Considering his reputation, expectations are dizzyingly high when he drops a new release. So is *San Francisco*, his latest offering, as golden as we'd all anticipate?

Visually, it gets off to a promising start. The retro cover by Roman Kucharski (following his excellent form on the likes of *Draftosaurus*) gives great box both outside and in, where even the component dividers are considered. However, it's sort of Kucharski's fault – thanks to his intricately sketched player boards – that the game seems weighty. It unfortunately isn't.

San Fran needs a makeover and players are the urban planners for the job. Everyone has a 5x5 board with the same districts to improve (parks, docks etc.) and corresponding project cards that are revealed or selected on a turn. Certain cards allow you to build a skyscraper for extra points, others cable car (tram) tracks, while completing a district unlocks one-off bonus actions. The game gives the impression of an engine builder (not least because the board is very *Wingspan*) but it essentially never gets any deeper than one-turn card placement or revealing.

To introduce some level of difficulty, projects come with a contract attached that prevents you from taking on other projects. Contracts can only be discarded one at a time and in two ways: every player has an equal number of contracts or the discard bonus tile is won. This can mean putting a contract back as soon as you've taken it (especially in the two-player game). It's a creaky device that prevents one person taking project after project but makes little sense beyond that.

The cable cars/trams can also be a bit of a non-starter and play a smaller role than anticipated for such a hilly city. Dreams of creating a spider's web of expertly connected lines are soon abandoned upon seeing that many cards are devoid of lines completely. There's a chance to pick up overlays for cards when completing a district, but not enough to feel as though you've made a realistic transport system. Cable car/tram enthusiasts may also be disappointed by the featureless meeples.

Skyscrapers bring an interesting 3D element. Extremely well designed considering their cardboard construction, they look great when standing tall on the board. They can only be built in the context of the right surrounding cards, and this condition manoeuvres us towards the first hint of challenge. There are a restricted

amount of scraper cards and when they are gone it's an immediate game over. That sounds dramatic, but it's also problematic because the cards are mixed into the one and only deck: in theory every scraper could appear early on in the game before it's got going.

When that doesn't happen, and play lasts the typical 45 minutes, time drags because the game is too light to sustain itself. After a few turns, it feels like you are going through the motions of pick a card, put it down, without any need to really engage your brain meaning you may switch off and get a bit bored. The low scoring system is another underwhelming aspect – particularly as there are half points and minus points in the mix. Other low scorers have a race element to a set score which incentivises players. That's missed here.

Let's return to those original expectations. *San Francisco* is a game you'd expect to love. You'll probably love the way it looks. But the gameplay? There are never really any difficult decisions to make, nor are there any showstopping achievements to be had. That doesn't mean you'll hate it. Worse: you might be a bit non-plussed. 📉

JENNY COX



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 City boards
- ▶ Project board
- ▶ 28 Cable car markers
- ▶ 87 Project cards
- ▶ 23 Point tokens
- ▶ 9 Skyscraper standees
- ▶ Scoring board
- ▶ 6 Bonus cards
- ▶ 12 Contract tokens
- ▶ 12 Bonus tokens
- ▶ Master builder's medal token
- ▶ 10 Foundation tokens

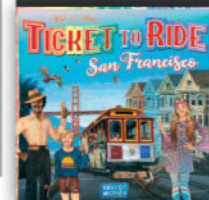


PLAY IT? MAYBE

It's hard to give a game a 'no' when it looks this good, so appearances are the only thing that saves it. *San Francisco* is attractive but feels too flimsy for a game of its length.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: TICKET TO RIDE: SAN FRANCISCO

This spin-off also steps back in time and has a similarly dazzling aesthetic, although its design is a more fulfilling play.





THE SPILL

A slippery slope to success

Designer: Andy Kim | Publisher: Smirk & Dagger Games



No other cooperative game manages to make removing cubes from the board as satisfying as *Pandemic*. A newcomer to the scene has to offer something extraordinary to escape *Pandemic*'s gigantic shadow, and *The Spill* definitely gives it a good try.

The Spill's most compelling success is the tight interweaving between the game's theme and the mechanics. Players are a response team coming out to the ocean to a recent accidental oil rig spillage. They will have to contain the spill, while attempting to save the local sea wildlife. In *The Spill*, 'the cubes on a map' take the form of black dice (representing oil) that can populate the circular board of four sectors each divided into six lanes, corresponding to the six-sided dice values. Players will be rolling these dice by using the oil rig dice tower and placing them according to which sector the fall and which value they show. If the dice lands on the animal, they become contaminated and if not saved immediately will have to go



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 36 Marine animal tokens
- ▶ 13 Resource cards
- ▶ Situation board
- ▶ 5 Specialist mats
- ▶ 20 Orange activation cubes
- ▶ 5 ship tokens
- ▶ 60 Black oil dice
- ▶ 4 Blue weather dice
- ▶ Dice bag
- ▶ Spill out token
- ▶ Oil rig dice tower



into a sick bay. If all three spaces on a lane are covered in oil – dice – the spill occurs, which may increase the number of dice players will need to drop in the dice tower on subsequent turns. If the spills get out of hand or there are too many animals in the sick bay, the players lose.

Every round of the game, indeed, feels like a constant fight against an ever-worsening disaster. Although player characters have a range of abilities that make them versatile as well as efficient at tasks that correspond to their strengths, every action in a turn is precious. A single timely removed oil dice can make a difference between an end of the game and getting one last winning condition. These also vary from game to game, depending on the objective cards players pick up at the start of the game. Although they will all involve some form of removal of oil and saving the animals, the

number of them and the manner or sequence of their removal adds varying difficulties to the game. Upon receiving their objectives, players can select certain resource cards to assist them with achieving them. Resource cards offer bonus actions, however, a certain number of oil will need to be removed or animals saved before they can be activated. So, while powerful and much-needed in clutch moments, players will still need to work to earn them.

The game's weakest point are the components, the quality of which is frustratingly uneven. The oil dice tower rig has an amazing table presence, but its construction is a little clumsy, sometimes making the tower, although visually almost imperceptible, lean slightly one way encouraging more dice to one sector. Kwanchai Moriya's artwork is second to none, but it also feels used very sparingly in the game. Animal tokens, especially, could have used some love because they look a little too cartoonish. A more realistic style could have enhanced the theming and underlined the weight of this man-made disaster further. There is also some unwieldiness with the initial set up, when all animal tokens must be placed on the board, or with arranging weather tokens (used to handicap character abilities) on each character board. In the game mechanically this straightforward, this fiddliness feels a little excessive.

Yet these are minor shortcomings that get easily outshined by everything *The Spill* does right. It has a fantastic theme, tackling an issue that needs more awareness and attention, which is coupled with easy to play mechanics that, nonetheless, make for a hard to win game. 📌

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? YES

The Spill's gameplay shows in a powerful way just how destructive to the natural world human interventions can be. It is made accessible by an easy to learn and pick up gameplay, while requiring highly coordinated teamwork to win.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PANDEMIC...

While it does not eclipse the slick gameplay of *Pandemic*, *The Spill*'s theme is strong enough to make it stand out in the ocean of other *Pandemic*-likes.

AIR MAIL

Is this high-flying route builder first class or lost in transit?

Designer: Toni Lopez | **Publisher:** Ludonova



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Double-sided game board
- ▶ 5 Income Counters
- ▶ 5 Technology Counters
- ▶ 115 plastic planes
- ▶ 90 cubes (packages)
- ▶ 60 Permit Cards
- ▶ 12 Special Permit Cards
- ▶ 12 Postal Service Decree Cards
- ▶ 64 United States Express Delivery Cards
- ▶ 52 Canada Express Delivery Cards
- ▶ 18 City Bonus tokens
- ▶ Starting Player token

It's the 1920s and the next big gold rush in North America is delivering packages via planes. But this isn't as easy as Postman Pat jumping in his van and tootling around Greendale to visit Mrs Goggins. No, you've got to fight for the most lucrative routes, while also making sure your planes are the most reliable. There isn't even a black and white cat to cheer you up when things go awry.



Air Mail is the latest network building game in the style of *Ticket to Ride* and *Age of Steam*, but here you're taking to the skies as you traverse the USA (in a two to five player game) or Canada (in a two to three player game). The inclusion of different maps is a nice touch right from the start, as the smaller Canada map ensures there's more interaction between players.

The aim of the game is to create a mail network by placing your cute little plastic planes on routes between cities. By using your network you can then earn cash by delivering packages across different divisions of the country, completing Postal Service Decrees (basically special missions) and making Express Deliveries to certain locations. The variety in scoring methods ensures you're going to have to balance your options carefully to score the big

points... although it can lead to a little analysis paralysis in the latter stages.

So, how do you place those planes? Good question! During the course of the game you either ask for a grant or draw Permit Cards, which are split into two colours, e.g. yellow and green. Then, a little like dominoes, you connect a matching colour to another Permit Card placed around the edge of the board. The colour you

match is then the 'active division' on the map and that division is where you can perform different actions.

In fact, there are four different actions for you to choose from. You see, playing a Permit Card generates three Operations Points, which you can spend on these available actions, although you need to bear in mind you can't repeat the same action. First up, you can place those all-important planes to expand your network. Next you can draw a new Permit Card. You could potentially improve your technology level or, finally, make a delivery from a city in the active division to a city in another division (you can't deliver to the same division).

Of course, in order to make the delivery, you need to be able to draw a route between the cities with the required planes. An interesting element

of *Air Mail* is that you can use routes owned by the other players. Although this is handy, they'll get paid for letting you use their network, which gives them cash. As a result, you have to weigh up the money you'll earn and what you'll generate for another player, as you could end up gifting them the victory.

As the game progresses you'll need to make longer and longer deliveries that pass through multiple cities and the only way to do that is by improving your technology level (one of the Permit Card actions). Each time you improve your planes, you can use more routes when making a delivery and you get paid more. Hooray! Unfortunately, this is also where the game slows down because the longer the route, the more complicated it gets to sit and work out the most efficient path, while also making sure you don't end up paying too much to your fellow players. As a result, although the early game is pretty



snappy, the latter stages can feel like more of a drag.

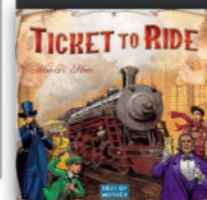
Air Mail is certainly an option for those looking for a slightly more advanced *Ticket to Ride*-style experience. However, it does lack the charm and ease of play of *Ticket to Ride* for younger players (even with those lovely planes) and there's more analysis paralysis in the latter stages. It's arguably better at two or three players (using the Canada side of the board) because gameplay doesn't slow down as much. 🍷

ROB BURMAN

PLAY IT? MAYBE

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TICKET TO RIDE...

If you've played *Ticket to Ride* (and its countless versions) to death, then *Air Mail* is a decent alternative with a similar theme and style of gameplay.



BAG OF CHIPS

Designer: Mathieu Aubert & Theo Riviere | **Publisher:** Mixlore

Bag of Chips is a simple hand-management and push-your-luck game that gathers two to five players around the table in a tense gamble for points. Each round begins with players receiving a hand of six objective cards, each detailing the colours (flavours?) or quantities of chips needed to score it. Following this, the round progresses in four steps of escalating tension.

First, five chips will be drawn from the bag and everyone chooses two objectives to discard. Then four more chips are drawn and another objective is discarded. Three more chips are then added to the pool at which point players must place one card on the negative scoring side of their play area and two on the positive. Finally, two chips arrive one by one before scores are calculated with any objectives not met awarding zero points.

Essentially what players are trying to do is shed a few risky cards which might not score whilst keeping one definite failure for their negative scoring area and two hopeful looking and high points scoring cards for the positive. But of course things don't always go to plan; your 'definite failure' might suddenly net you negative fifty points with that last chip from the bag and your greed for points may well have overshadowed the likelihood of actually completing the other two.

From the use of the word 'salty' in the game's tagline one would suspect *Bag of Chips* to have included some form of 'take-that' mechanics. But, for better or worse, that's not the case. In fact, for something that has the novelty and aesthetic of a party game, there's not much interaction here at all. And whilst the decisions here are interesting enough, this *Bag of Chips*



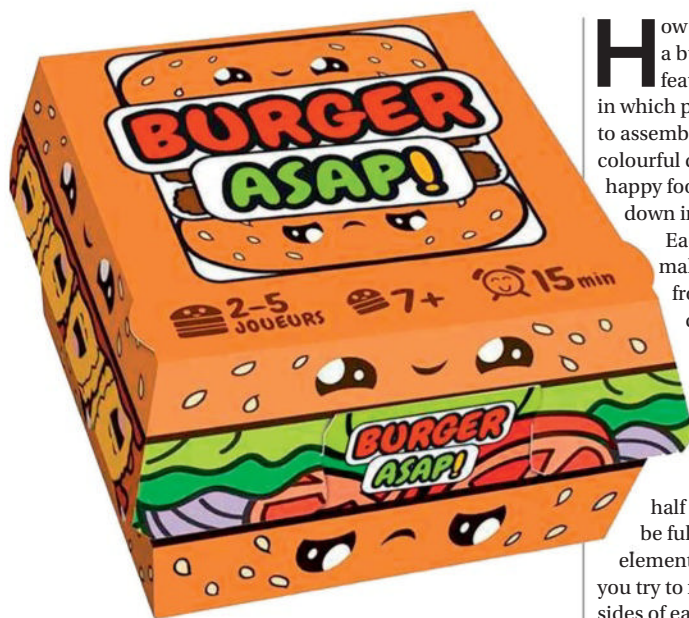
seems to be missing some of the key ingredients that make a successful party game. 📉

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? NO

BURGER ASAP!

Designer: Mashiu | **Publisher:** Mixlore



How fast can you assemble a burger? *Burger ASAP!* is a featherweight puzzle game in which players race to be the first to assemble burger orders. It has a colourful design reminiscent of the happy food in *Sushi Go* and it packs down into a burger box.

Each round you'll race to make a specified set of burgers from the seven ingredient cards in front of you. Every player has the same set of ingredients from which they must construct the burgers and every card must be used. Cards can overlap, hiding up to half of a card but no card can be fully concealed. There's an element of memory to the game as you try to familiarise yourself with the sides of each of your cards and there is a tiny amount of tactile satisfaction as you become more adept at rapidly



searching and laying out your ingredients.

There's not much to *Burger ASAP!*; it makes for a pleasant 5-10 minutes but it's a far cry from the frantic excitement and desire for "just one more round" of something like *Dobble*. The simplicity makes it easy to teach and enjoy with all ages but it's not a game that's going to hold anyone's attention for very long. The racing nature of the game does require a certain amount of focus though. Being generous, *Burger ASAP!* could be a nice way to shift from thinking about the worries of the day and into a gaming mood or even as a way to decompress after something particularly crunchy.

Burger ASAP! might make a nice stocking filler, but kids and adults will both have more fun elsewhere. 📉

GEORGE BARKER

PLAY IT? NO

WORDLE: THE PARTY GAME

Have a word...

Designer: Hasbro | Publisher: Hasbro



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 3 Wordle boards
- ▶ 3 GM-screen style shields
- ▶ Secret word board
- ▶ 3 Dry-wipe markers
- ▶ 45 Green tiles
- ▶ 45 Yellow tiles



Wordle, the online word-wrangling sensation. Originally just a standalone webpage containing the five-letter word puzzle by developer Josh Wardle, later purchased by the New York Times, it offered a kind of desynchronised game with everyone else on the internet. My first experience of Wordle was seeing the yellow and green boxes turning up on Twitter as people shared (boasted?) about their ability to guess a five-letter word. It was extremely of its moment, and created hundreds of copycat versions online (Heardle, Wordle for audio. Worldle, Wordle for countries. My favourite, Redactle, Wordle but for entire Wikipedia articles.) And now, we have the board game tie-in.

For those completely unfamiliar, you have six guesses at the five-letter word of the day. This word is the same for everyone in the world, and there's only one per 24 hour period. It's a little bit ritual, a little bit Scrabble.

Each time you guess a word, the letters are overlaid in yellow (this letter is in the word, but not here) or green (right letter, right place). Get it right, and you too can copy and paste a bit of text that uses green and yellow emoji squares to express how you guessed your way to victory into your preferred social media app.

For the board game, it's nearly identical. Except that you're all human, and waiting for one another. One player (the host) picks the secret word, the others scribble guesses behind their screens. The host player then wanders round and peeks behind each screen, transparent green and yellow tokens – just like on the web game! Except it's a person! Also, you're going to have to wait for everyone to have a guess as well. I hope you brought something to amuse yourself with...

Look, this board game is exactly the only thing you can do to make a board game of Wordle. There's not much more to it. There's the benefit of being

able to play repeatedly with different words. Or themes. Or writing 'boobs' as the secret word (technically illegal, but you can house-rule the game) and getting severe eye-rolls from everyone else around the table.

Wordle was (and maybe still is) special to people because it's a private frustration. Countless times I've been stumped by the collection of letters in front of me. When I am idly staring at my phone, that's great. When there's some people waiting around the table for me to just get on with it, that's a whole different experience. It's the ritual of one chance a day at this little puzzle that tons of other people are doing. The board game captures none of these experiences, which is fine, but makes the whole thing a bit redundant. ➔

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? NO

Unless you're a real Wordle head, and need something to while away the time between each day's word.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WORDLE...

As in the website. If you're really desperate to play pretty much the only thing they could do with the format as a board game, then this is an option.



ELEVEN

Football manage your expectations

Designer: Thomas Jansen | Publisher: Portal

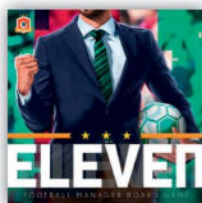


Many games have taken a run at the – on the face of it, ideal – theme of football, and many have fallen to a career-ending double-footed tackle in the penalty box, their top flight dreams ended by lacklustre mechanics, drab presentation, or overly-simulationist fiddly implementation – and occasionally, all three.

Eleven is a management game, where you attempt to guide your team to league success over six weeks. Every week you'll resolve an issue facing the club, contract sponsors, refurbish your ground and facilities, hire staff and players, then at the weekend, you'll play a match, using scouts' reports to decide your tactics and which star players to include.

Let me tip my hand early: *Eleven* is very much a game of two halves. Some things it does well – superbly, in fact – and others it executes only adequately, or completely botches. As a reviewer, this feels worse than if the game had been merely bad – it's absolutely not – but I came away feeling that with a little more care and playtesting, this might have been elevated from a cluttered, intermittently-fun game, to a much-needed classic.

First off, the good. The board of directors system is inspired. At the beginning of the game you'll draft three directors to sit on your club's board. Most give you a boost to your income in one of four resources – money, fan goodwill, infrastructure and fitness – while offering either a one-off bonus, an ongoing benefit, or a special action you can use once per week. In addition, every Monday you'll draw an event card that details some issue your club is facing – a player has been badmouthing your decisions in interviews, an away match requires such a long journey that it might be worth chartering a flight – with three potential responses: one that prioritises profit, one that prioritises the players, and one that serves the interests of supporters. Each director has different biases, and



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ League table board
- ▶ 88 resource markers
- ▶ Twelve-sided die
- ▶ 20 Strength tokens
- ▶ 12 Weakness tokens
- ▶ 10 Injury tokens
- ▶ 10 Suspension tokens
- ▶ 24 Victory point tokens
- ▶ 62 Player cards
- ▶ 12 Tactic cards
- ▶ 12 Objective cards
- ▶ 16 Director cards
- ▶ 36 Staff cards
- ▶ 36 Sponsor cards
- ▶ 36 Board meeting cards
- ▶ 64 Opponent cards
- ▶ 3 Opponent dice
- ▶ 16 Opponent team markers
- ▶ 8 Reminder tokens
- ▶ 8 Multiplier tokens
- ▶ Stage marker

you'll roll a single dice to see how the board votes.

It's a smart, intuitive mechanic that lets you decide what kind of club you want to run right from the beginning, and it brings out the theme beautifully. You're not the club – you've been hired to do a job, and sometimes the directors will make a decision that makes that job harder



(though you can spend fan pressure as a resource to reroll the result).

Upgrading your ground and contracting sponsors both feel well-implemented and straightforward. You can sell adboard space for instant cash and/or income, and the cards slot under your stadium board so the logo is visible – a lovely touch. Choose a kit sponsor and you'll get a special bonus – or you can just sell tannoy ads for a quick payoff. Build new stands, a merch shop, floodlights – they all fit on your board and increase your income or capacity.

Onto the meh, and bad. The rulebook – while lavish and attractive – is not fit for purpose. It's poorly laid-out, many of the explanations are unintuitive, and the actual examples of how to resolve matches show the pitch in the wrong orientation. Not fatal, by any means, but frustrating

when you're starting out. Expect a long set up and steep learning curve.

The actual mechanics of resolving matches are... only okay? Flip the team card, compare their players' strength in each section to yours, score goals accordingly. There are only four setups per team, so as you play you'll have advance knowledge.

It feels bizarre to use a system

that abandons dice where they'd be most exciting and, more fatally, makes match ups with other players impossible. You're in a league together but you can never play each other! Why? Why design the game so the most exciting scenario – player v player – is excluded? Why make us roll for injuries but not goals?

Eleven is very much a solo game masquerading as multiplayer – and, to its credit, it includes several well-fleshed-out solo scenarios with special conditions. The central tactical mechanic feels like an odd mishmash of compromises. Under the crust, there are pieces of a superb, deep football management game. If you're very patient and love the theme, they may just be enough brilliance here to make it worth the purchase. 🍷

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? MAYBE



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WEMBLEY...

Despite being seventy years old, classic football management game *Wembley* still holds up as a fun – if drastically simplified – contest to win the FA Cup. *Eleven* asks far more of players but offers fathoms more depth in return, so if you're itching for a crunchier – though not necessarily more enjoyable – experience, it might be for you.

CHAINSOMNIA

A chain link short of greatness

Designer: Shou Aoyama, Yukio Shimami, Yuso Taya | **Publisher:** Japanime Games



One-night, little children went to bed and the next morning they couldn't be roused. An evil demon trapped their souls in his dream castle full of darkness and nightmares, chaining the children so they could not escape. Terrifying, right? Yet, add cutesy-like artwork and the whole concept is somehow darkly adorable? This is a mix that only Japanime games can successfully pull off.

CHAINsomnia, under the covers of this strange but somehow compelling theme, is a dungeon crawler, where players take on the roles of the

are also ominous event cards, which trigger bad effects as soon as they are revealed. On a rare occasion, players can draw an auspicious event that can help the children with their tasks. To escape and so win the game, the children will need to defeat all bad dreams in the rooms and at least one player must find and reach the Wake-up tile.

This, however, will not be easy. On top of bad dreams blocking the path, the children are also chained to this dark realm, with some events increasing the number of links that, if ever reach six, will prevent them from

to do anything on their turn. If you are the player tied to the spot with six chain links, it can become increasingly frustrating as you can't do anything until your teammates come to save you.

It is also important to play to the character's strengths, although it can pigeon-hole players into specific tasks. For example, a character with a high luck attribute is more likely to succeed on the dice roll required to remove chains, which typically are based on luck checks. Therefore, some characters may find themselves focusing more on these tasks, whereas others apply their skills elsewhere. Every character's ability directly counteracts some obstacle the game can throw at them. Timi, for example, gets more actions, the more chained down she gets. Ryan can move through bad dreams, while all other characters would be stuck. It is nice that the game doesn't get stuck in the typical dungeon crawler archetypes, such as warrior, rogue and others, but instead comes up with powers that relate directly to specific aspects of the gameplay. However, that further encourages players to stick to specific actions or team combinations. It is, therefore, helpful to choose characters that gel more with your playstyle, so you get to do things in the game that you are likely to enjoy the most.

If players manage to escape the demon's grasp, they get to open an envelope containing secret endings. It is a bittersweet moment because the story ending well change depending on how well or badly (perhaps, someone was left behind chained to the nightmares?) the team has done. It may be, that the kids will need to travel to the dark realm once again to save their friends...

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? MAYBE

Both dark and strangely adorable, *CHAINsomnia* offers an interesting spin on a dungeon crawler experience is both accessible and tough, although a little lacklustre in gameplay variability.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Summary cards
- ▶ 6 Character boards
- ▶ 6 Character figures
- ▶ 6 AP markers
- ▶ 30 Chain tokens
- ▶ Starting player marker
- ▶ 3 Dice
- ▶ 20 Item cards
- ▶ 40 Event cards
- ▶ 22 Room tiles
- ▶ Mystery envelope



children and attempt to escape the demon's castle while fighting bad dreams along the way. The castle is composed of tiles, drawn at random from a stack, which players reveal as the game progresses. However, the addition of each new tile also requires players to draw from an event deck, which in most cases leads to nothing good. Most of the deck is composed of bad dreams, cards that will prevent players progressing further, until bad spirits are vanquished. There

taking any actions until some are removed. *CHAINsomnia* challenges players with constant danger mitigation. Players will need to reveal the tiles quickly so they can find the final Wake-up tile. The bad effects from bad dreams and increasing number of chains on characters can quickly cascade into an unwieldy (and unwinnable) situation. Players will need to keep on top of removing chains or they might end up with too many characters who are unable

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BETRAYAL AT HOUSE ON THE HILL

Compared to *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, escape from the dark-scary-place-that-is-trying-to-kill-you is simplified and streamlined in *CHAINsomnia*, with a baddie known from the start: the demon. However, just because *CHAINsomnia* is quicker to learn, it doesn't mean it will be easier to win!

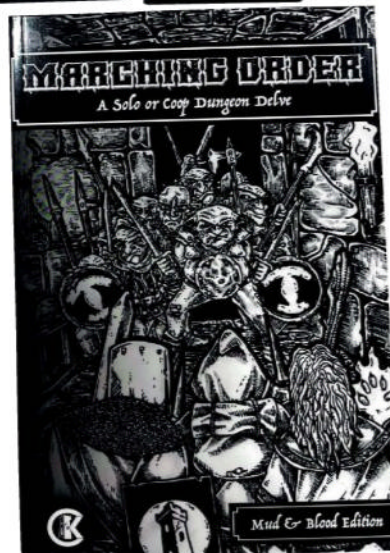
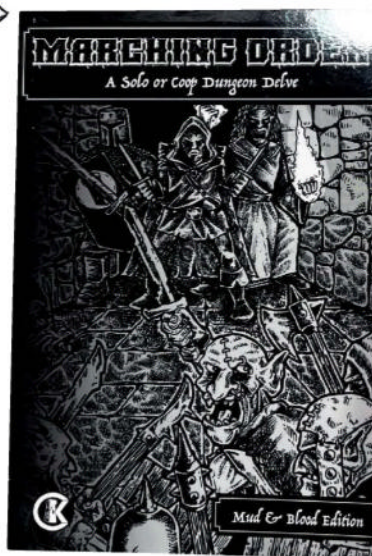
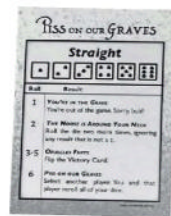




MARCHING ORDER

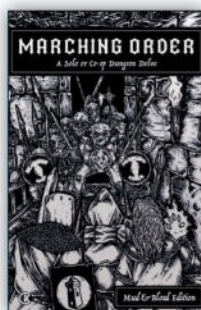
Escape the Darkest Dungeon

Designer: James Crane & Brad Kishbaugh | Publisher: Crumbling Keep



Marching Order is the kind of indie production I like. A little bit rough around the edges. Complete, but a little sprawling. One too many ideas. A box that is a bit like one of those cardboard fish and chip boxes you sometimes get at the seaside. Except black of course. What it lacks in finesse is made up for with enthusiasm.

This is a monochrome dungeon delving adventure that shares a great deal with the extremely popular Darkest Dungeon video games. In both, players put together a team of rogues of different stripes (thief, sellsword, doctor, archer and so on), and head into a decaying space like a mansion. Go in, get loot, try and not die. Pretty standard. But both *Marching Order* and *Darkest Dungeon* model the idea of character positions, the literal 'marching order' of your characters. Your archer is best as the back, your chap with the shield at the front. You can only make certain attacks a certain range of space away, and any time something messes up your party configuration, you're going to start pulling your hair out. *Marching Order* is a brilliant recreation of this battle system for the tabletop. Not only is it



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 50+ Monster and rogue cards
- ▶ Rogue's guide book
- ▶ Delve book



frustrating and good fun, but you're up against the 'bullshit dice' which is just a chance of one of your character's qualities or flaws triggering. Maybe they move position, maybe they goad an ally into attacking them. It's all good fun. The benefits of some qualities can be lifesaving too. Bullshit cuts both ways it seems.

The delves themselves are pre-generated, and this can make them feel more cohesive. There's no map however, so you'll soon be scribbling your own and making notes. This ends up being a smart system for saving your progress, and a cool kind of 'fog of war' as the maps open up. They're schlocky, horror-tinged stuff – you're not going to find the greatest writing in the world here, but also, you're mostly here to kill monsters and get treasure, so it seems like a fair deal.

The monster encounters do feel a bit like 'wade through 20 rats' as you expect at the start of many digital RPGs. But because the enemies

are very simple to run (it's roll dice and look up what they do) and have their own bullshit tables (a wererat turning into a giant rat against their will mid-fight is pretty funny) combat always has a feeling of tipping over into chaos.

As a solo adventure with a party of four under your control, it plays like a desperate puzzle of exploration and to-the-wire fights. As a multiplayer game you're either going to end up collaborating on everything, or, in what I think is the spirit of the game, half ignoring one another's pleas for a heal because you reckon you can kill this enemy in one.

Altogether, *Marching Order* is exactly the right mix of fiddly depth, and silliness – especially for the rough and ready aesthetic. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

A great crunchy dungeon delver for fans of tactical, turn-based combat.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DARKEST DUNGEON

Yes, the video game. If you like *Darkest Dungeon*, then this is the tabletop translation you've been looking for (at least, the one that doesn't come with hundreds of miniatures at any rate).

MAUI

Lazy fun in the sand – just don't forget your towel

Designer: Frank Crittin, Grégoire Largey, Sébastien Pauchon | Publisher: Next Move Games



deposited dollars. It's a tiny nod to an in-game economy – there are only six sand dollars in the whole game, just four with two players – but it provides a bundle of interesting choices.

Do I get a less good towel now, and save my

money? Do I waste a turn picking up more dollars? Do I hoard all the money in the game to cripple my opponent... and restrict myself at the same time?

There are two game modes, one with point-earning-pearls to collect as you work across the board, the other with point-stealing-crabs to avoid. They flavour the experience

beautifully, the former mode giving a little dopamine hit of joy when collecting pearls, the latter snapping at you bad-temperedly as you fail to avoid the crab. We've most enjoyed the double game, taking on the nasty – and the designers provide an extended

score card for the purpose. The box is nice, although it comes with a pretty insert that is fundamentally useless at keeping all the tokens together when you move it more than about an inch.

Maui comes from the same studio as *Azul*, another cute abstract game with just the right amount of player interaction. It's an easy comparison; *Azul* is crunchier and more mentally taxing. It's the "better" game, unless you don't want to tax yourself. For a lazy Saturday afternoon, or introducing a friend to the world of competitive cardboard, you could do a lot worse than *Maui*.

CHRIS LOWRY

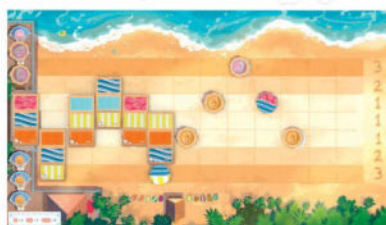
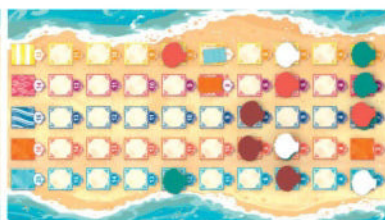
PLAY IT? YES

We forget sometimes that games can be about relaxation. *Maui* is one of the chilliest challenges I've played in years... unless the crabs get you!



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 28 Crab tiles
- ▶ 28 Umbrella tiles
- ▶ 112 Towel tiles
- ▶ Towel token bag
- ▶ 6 Sand dollars
- ▶ 4 Player beach boards
- ▶ Central score board
- ▶ Extension board
- ▶ Towel selection board



Sometimes you aren't looking for an intense game. Sometimes it just been a really long day – or a busy week – and you find yourself hankering for something gentle. You like the idea of something to get your brain thinking-but-not-hurting, a challenge somewhere short of an actual puzzle. Perhaps it might have a little player interaction, enough to let you nuzzle your opponent, to toy with them, but also to let you focus on the pretty stuff in front of you. Does any of the above resonate? If so, *Maui* may well be the game you don't have yet.

It certainly doesn't hurt that "the pretty stuff" in this case is arranging colourful towels on the sun-drenched beaches of Hawaii. *Maui* is a game of selecting towel tiles, and placing them on your personal beach board. The aim is to put together a peaceful little tableau, where matching tiles

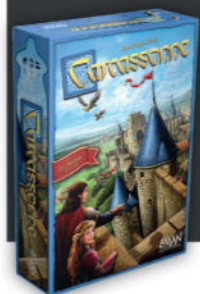
maximise your scores on five colour tracks.

Now, it might sound a little simple, but there's *just enough* to make this game surprisingly moreish. Firstly, each towel has three patterns on it, each of which can match with adjacent tiles and score a point. Secondly, going vertically up or down the beach makes those scores increase. The satisfaction of perfectly matching all three patterns whilst also doubling – or even tripling – some of the scores? It's significant!

Selecting your next towel tile is another neat little system. You can select a towel from the first available row for free, from the next row for a cost of one sand dollar, or the final row for two sand dollars. If you don't have the cash, or the right tiles aren't available, you can forfeit your turn and pick up all the previously

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CARCASSONNE

...I love *Carcassonne*, although sometimes I feel tempted to add in every expansion I own. *Maui*'s theme is a contrast from mediaeval pastoralism, but brings a similarly satisfying feeling to the tabletop.





DELICIOUS

Veg out and get fruity

Designer: Steve Finn & Eduardo Baraf | **Publisher:** Pencil First Games



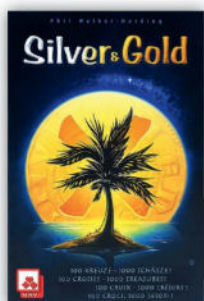
Designer Steve Finn likes to keep it chill. With previous titles, he's invited players to plant herbs (*Herbaceous*), arrange flowers (*Floriferous*), paint a landscape (*Sunset Over Water*) or arrange fancy knick-knacks (*The Whatnot Cabinet*). Finn's latest game follows in the green-fingered (or should that be green-toed?) footsteps of *Herbaceous*, except this time it's fruit and veg you're growing rather than tasty weeds. In terms of mechanisms, however, this is quite a different kettle of broccoli. Rather than being a push-your-luck set-collecting card game, *Delicious* is a flip-and-write affair; a puzzley experience with a dash of artiness.

Each round two cards are turned, one above the other, each card revealing an image of a vegetable, with a smaller visual prompt to add a random token (drawn from a bag) on either its 'tool' or 'fruit' side. The aim is to fill a bunch of point-scoring white-space slots in all your garden's containers, represented on a sheet of colourfully illustrated paper. Preferably, you'll be sketching each vegetable or fruit (the game comes with a little 'how to draw' guide), though if you can't be arsed, it's fine to simply mark the space with the plant or berry's first letter (B for blueberry and so on). But you can't just go shoving any



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 100 Garden sheets
- ▶ 100 Player sheets
- ▶ 30 Vegetable cards
- ▶ 30 Fruit/Tool tokens
- ▶ Token bag
- ▶ Jar of Honey card
- ▶ 4 Pencils
- ▶ Crow meeple (for solo variant)



old veggie or fruit into any old place. That would be far too simple. There are rules.

The wheelbarrow, for example, can take only one of each vegetable, with no doubling up allowed. Wellies, meanwhile, require pairs of identical veg (makes sense, we guess). And the suitcase demands three of a kind. Wherever you plant, you always have to start at the bottom row and work your way up. Additionally, your vegetable garden is split into an upper half and a lower half. The top card dictates that you plant in the upper section, and the card below shows the veg which must go in the lower. Well, most of the time. You do get a limited number of options to change that, either using just one or other of the cards, or switching 'upper' and 'lower', or simply planting in whichever section you like.

Then there's those tool and fruit tokens. The tool tokens essentially allow you a bonus fruit-or-veg placement in a row or column that depicts that particular tool. The fruit tokens let you plant the depicted fruit in your fruit planter (on the right side of the sheet), as long as the

space matches the shape of the frame around said depicted fruit. You score for these in rows and columns.

It is a very thinky game, and despite its unlimited player count it's not exactly party-friendly. Each player is concerned purely with their own garden, and looking at other players' sheets is a pointless distraction. This utter absence of interaction (beyond one-off bonus points for being the first to complete containers and garden sections) can make it a rather sterile experience – ironically – despite the game's organic arty-expressive intentions. However, it does positively invite solo play, with designer Eduardo Baraf providing a more challenging one-player variant involving a pesky crow. As such, we recommend it to gamers looking more for a focused solitaire snack than a new game-night staple. 🍌

DAN JOLIN

PLAY IT? MAYBE

It's pleasantly diverting but not exactly deep, and doesn't really lend itself to a vibrant group experience. However, solitaire gamers might want to give it a look – or anyone interested in how to sketch vegetables better.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SILVER & GOLD...

It's very similar to Phil Walker-Harding's nautical flip-and-write, though the theme is considerably less adventurous.

PATCHWORK: STACK 'N STUFF

Look, you can't just throw stuff in a van...

Designer: Uwe Rosenberg & Marianne Waage | **Publisher:** Lookout Games



Uwe Rosenberg's *Patchwork* was somewhat of a sensation back in 2015, at a time where tabletop gaming was starting to push out of male-heavy geek culture and into "normal" people's lives. It combined a (perhaps) traditionally feminine theme of quilting with an incredibly tight two-player competition. This made a perfect stepping stone for couples that might not have otherwise considered board gaming for them.

Stack 'n Stuff extends that wide invitation to children and young families. Together, you compete to load a delivery van with "Stack" tiles and earn coins. Go past a coin stop on the board and get more coins! Reach the house at the end of the road, and pay a penalty for empty spaces in your van. Clearly, this is *Patchwork Light* (in fact, it's heavily based on the previous title *Patchwork*

Express). Compared to *Patchwork*, it has a shorter play length, and slightly less mechanics; taking about 90 seconds to teach, compared to its older sibling's 2 minutes. The main differences are a) less spaces on your player board, b) no bonus reward for completing a 7x7 square block first, c) simpler "Stuff" tiles that are kept back until nearer the end, to make it easier for a player to fill awkward gaps.

I think it achieves everything it sets out to do, but is still a lesser game as a result. It is slightly easier to pick up, and 10 minute play length is shorter than 15 in the original. However I missed the strategic complexity of the 7x7 bonus and the larger board. My main problem is that *Patchwork* never felt particularly random; I always felt mostly in control of my choices. In *Stack 'n Stuff*, the narrower range of tiles and space to fit them means there are moments, much more often,

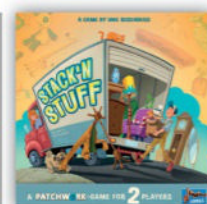
where you just don't have a tile you want available to you.

The question that needs to be asked, really, is "Did *Patchwork* need a simpler version". The age on the box here is 6+, but I've played *Patchwork* with a four year old. They weren't very good at it - humblebrag I won - but they had fun, and I was able to complete a thoughtful little challenge whilst they enjoyed themselves. *Stack 'n Stuff* is probably about as much fun for a four year old, but my 6 year old is able to cope with the only-very-slightly-more-difficult rules of the first game, and it's a lot more fun for me. 🍀

CHRIS LOWRY

PLAY IT? MAYBE

If you've never played *Patchwork*, and you have a 4 year old that you are aching to introduce to board games, *Stack 'n Stuff* is for you. Otherwise, I'd pick up the original.



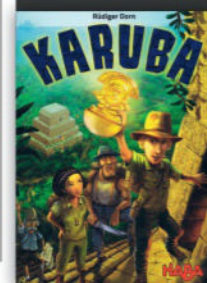
WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Time Board
- ▶ Truck
- ▶ 2 Player boards
- ▶ 6 Boxes
- ▶ 34 Coin tiles
- ▶ 2 Time tokens
- ▶ 8 Stuff tiles
- ▶ 15 Stack tiles



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED KARUBA...

Karuba is an adventure in the jungle, whilst *Stack 'n Stuff* is a jaunt in the urban environment, but both involve the inevitable inability to place tiles when and where you want. *Karuba* is a little more involved, but you also get to pick up shiny gems!





WONDER WOODS

A mysterious yet merry mushpit

Designer: Eli Thomas Wolf | **Publisher:** Blue Orange Games



“Competitive Secret Mushroom Picking” is one of those themes I didn’t know I wanted in a game until I had it. *Wonder Woods* is one such game and by goodness if it doesn’t deliver a half-hour of hurriedly hoping your horticultural hoarding heralds happiness.

The game is simple: each of the four different mushrooms has a set of four points cards, numbered 1, 3, 5 and 7. At the start of the game, each mushroom’s set is shuffled and one card placed face down near its matching board. The remaining cards are then shuffled together and distributed to the players, so everyone has some idea of how much each mushroom could be worth (for example, if you have the morel cards numbered 1 and 3 in hand, those mushrooms are going to be valuable in this game.)

Each turn, players must spend baskets to visit a patch to grab one mushroom. As each patch is visited,



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 35 Wooden basket tokens
- ▶ 56 Wooden mushroom tokens
- ▶ First player token
- ▶ 4 Mushroom patch boards
- ▶ 16 Info cards



the amount of baskets required to spend increases, forcing you to choose between picking up fewer mushrooms that might be worth more points. Once players can no longer play baskets in a round, whoever spent the most baskets in each patch also grabs a bonus mushroom, as compensation for their heavy investment.

As players gather their baskets back but before a new round begins, everyone has the choice to add another basket to their supply, but only if they reveal one of their hidden cards to the rest of the group. This dynamic twist can change the entire course of the game, as by revealing what one mushroom isn’t worth, you could be giving an opponent the final clue they need to work out which patch is going to be the biggest point earner.

The game ends once at least two patches are emptied, with the final winner being whoever earned the most points from their array of fungi.

I’ve now explained the game’s entire rules and shown the biggest hooks in its core puzzle in less than half a review. The game shines in its simplicity, as players begin by tentatively hedging their bets on which patch might be the most profitable, before a mad rush unfurls as multiple cards for one mushroom are revealed and everyone attempts to snatch up the last few remaining. You can often get a sense for what people believe to be valuable just by seeing how much they’re willing to commit to grabbing one particular type, sometimes leading to moments of struggling to keep a straight face as you see someone invest all their time picking a mushroom you know for a fact to be worth a few measly points apiece.

I love the game’s commitment to its natural theming by including only environmentally friendly components, with the delightfully block printed mushrooms and baskets going tidily away into a brown paper envelope, it just feels like you’re sprinkling a packet of joy every time you start playing.

Much as I adore this game’s straightforward mechanics and wonderful visual design, I’ve also struggled to play many games of it back-to-back and it feels very much like a “filler” game you bring out alongside a few other titles to play in a fun hour or two of microgames. But for those of you who love games that can be completed in minutes and are great for a giggle, *Wonder Woods* is definitely a wonderful game to look at and play, plus the tiny box makes it ideal for when travelling or sneaking into a small gap in your board game collection. 🍄

MATTHEW VERNALL

PLAY IT? YES

A charming game of deduction and set collection that zooms along at a lovely pace, works great as an in-between title for your game nights.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: LOVE LETTER...

Another quick game that helps kickstart a session of gaming, both of these titles take simple rules with a dash of reading social cues to elevate these games of silly, speedy fun.

WAYFARERS OF THE SOUTH TIGRIS

The stakes are high in both desert and sky

Designer: Shem Phillips & S J Macdonald | Publisher: Renegade



Kicking off Garphill Games latest series following the *North Sea* and *West Kingdom* trilogies is *Wayfarers of the South Tigris*, a worker and dice placement title of cartographic set-collection. But that sounds somewhat reductive; it turns out mapping the land, seas, and stars surrounding Baghdad is a touch more complex than that. Indeed, across it's substantial (yet variable) game-length, players will be optimising their own dice-placement spots, navigating an unpredictable market of public workers, and building a personal panoramic tableau from no less than five different decks.

So, as you might've guessed, *Wayfarers* leans toward the heavier end of Garphill's spectrum, but does this weight lead to something that feels fun or new? The short answer is yes. Fans of the previous trilogies might find themselves

tableau, or sending a worker out to one of twenty cards surrounding the main board. These cards are organised into five sections representing Townsfolk, Space, Land, Sea, and Inspiration, and placing a worker upon one subsequently activates the ability printed above or below.

Whilst players begin the game with a couple of workers, they do not exclusively own them. Instead, *Wayfarers* opts for a far more interactive solution to worker management by having them fall into the possession of whoever adds the cards they sit upon to their tableau. In this sense, it's

particular benefits. It's a brilliant take on die customisation merged with polyomino mechanics, one which would be exciting to see developed in future games, but in this form makes for an engaging mini-puzzle.

Elevating the challenge of *Wayfarers* dramatically is the sense of risk tied up with the Journaling track. Looking much like a tech-tree, this is where players track their progress, with each junction presenting a choice of prerequisites which must be satisfied before advancing. Once a player reaches a final spot the game end is triggered. But racing through this

track is foolish, as without meticulous planning it is not uncommon to reach a



in familiar territory – thanks to the aesthetics and mechanical touches such as Tags and card combining – but will likely lose themselves once *Wayfarers'* unique blend of mechanics kicks in. Thankfully, this initial disorientation soon gives way to the realisation that the real weight and originality here comes from the meaty decision making players have let themselves in for; decisions that can either make or devastatingly break a player's strategy.

Turns typically revolve around players either assigning a die to one of the available action spots within their

entirely possible for a player to hold a monopoly on workers – although the more likely result is their almost organic circulation amongst players. It's a fascinating approach to the genre and sits well beside the more dominant dice-placement mechanics occurring within the game.

The dice-placement too has its own twists, particularly in regard to the customisation of each players' Caravan. Displayed rather abstractly at the top of the player boards, the Caravan comprises of a grid set beneath a row of die pips. Over time, tiles depicting the symbols needed for certain actions will fill the grid, giving the die result above those

junction whose prerequisites cannot be fulfilled. Players falling into this trap might be tempted to call the game 'broken', but viewed in a different light this potential for punishment signifies a precision and craft extending to both the game's design and how players should approach it.

With this in mind, *Wayfarers* may not be the most accessible or inviting title in Garphill Games generally approachable catalogue, but its masterful blending and reinventing of mechanics, alongside the challenge it presents, makes for an irresistibly moreish experience for seasoned gamers. 🍷

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? YES

A genuinely challenging puzzle packed with engaging and original mechanics.

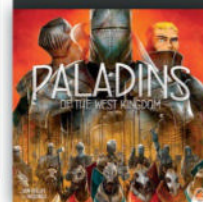


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 7 Game Boards
- ▶ 166 Cards
- ▶ 20 Dice
- ▶ 76 Wooden Tokens
- ▶ 168 Cardboard Tokens
- ▶ Plastic Insert

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PALADINS OF THE WEST KINGDOM

Similarly weighted and both packed with 'The Mico's' fantastic art.





PRECOGNITION

Seeing into the future of gaming?

Designer: Julien Prothière | **Publisher:** Ludonaute



It's pretty brave to lead a rulebook by explaining the card system the game is introducing. That's precisely what *Precognition* does, before you even get to the component list or story blurb. It suggests publisher Ludonaute will be supporting it with more titles. So, I guess we should also begin with the aforementioned 'Dual Select System'.

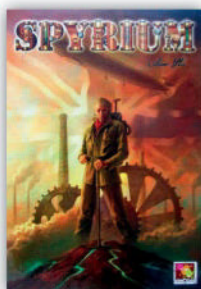
In *Precognition*, each player has a slightly asymmetric 24-card deck. It is split into three seasons of roughly equal numbers, each of which is shuffled individually to make a single phased draw deck. You draw the top two cards from your deck and put them face up in front of the player to your right. Then you draw two more cards for yourself, adding your two Choice cards (which you always keep) to your hand.

Now follows a slight revision of 'I split; you choose.' You place your 'Give' Choice card with one of the face-up cards in front of you, match your 'Keep' Choice card with one of



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 player boards
- ▶ 12 player board extension tiles
- ▶ 42 river location tiles
- ▶ 90 meeples
- ▶ 136 cards
- ▶ 8 wooden cubes
- ▶ 100+ cardboard tokens



your other three cards, then pair up the remaining two cards. The 'Give' card goes back to the player who gave you it, while you collect a card back from those you gave to your right. You now have the two cards you'll play this round (the one given to you and the one you kept) – while the last two cards are given to the player to your right, as you did previously. Card choosing is done secretly and simultaneously.

And so, you have the precognition the game title suggests. You know that you'll be getting one of the two cards you gave the player on your right, so you have a good idea what one of your two cards will be. In *Precognition*, these cards come in four colours each of which matches an action. So, if you give them two cards of the same colour, you know you'll be getting to

do that action. Better still, if both the cards you play in a turn match, you get to do two bonus actions as well. So, you can set yourself up for that if you're happy to do the same action twice. It takes a turn or two to get your head around the idea, but once you have it works extremely well. I'm just not sure it's as revolutionary as Ludonaute seems to suggest. Or if *Precognition* is a great vehicle to launch it with.

The theme sees you traversing a river as an alien race, gathering human survivors of a disaster and curing them of a disease. The game plays over 12 rounds represented by 12 randomised river tiles. Each round a tile is flipped, either giving/removing some resources from players or demanding you feed (or lose) your cured humans. The four actions give aliens, humans, food, or batteries to power machines.

Each alien can be used to cure infected humans or fend off end of round dangers. While machines give extra resources for matching the card types they need with your played cards. Card benefits cost cured humans to play, who then need to be cured again. While final scoring is simply the number of cured humans you have.

Everything works very smoothly. But after a single game, each player I tried *Precognition* with asked, nice – but is that it? And sadly, yes, it is. There are only 15 river tiles, of which you use 12 each game, and they are samey. There are some more complex machines, but they all operate within this very confined action-resource system. There is also a co-op variant using shared objectives, which has its own set of river tiles. But again, while a nice change initially, it all still plays out in a very confined environment. So, while *Precognition* does the job of introducing the very interesting Dual Select System, said system is still waiting for a less instantly forgettable game to hang its hat on. 🍌

CHRIS MARLING

PLAY IT? MAYBE

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SPYRIUM...

Spyrium. A similar weight and length, with a similarly clever mechanism that sits atop a simple resource management game.

THE WOLVES

Fluffy, yet fiendish

Designer: Ashwin Kamath, Clarence Simpson | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games



First things first, this game is gorgeous. Evocative box cover? Check. Beautifully laid out rulebook with clear instructions and visual aids? Check. Fantastically illustrated game boards festooned with charming wooden wolf meeples and other tactile-pleasing pieces? Massive check with little decorative moons. But be warned, behind its beauty hides a devious little challenge.

The Wolves revolves around players taking two actions each turn in the grand tradition of 4X games, to explore the map, expand control of

ahead, as bigger actions will require you to have many matching terrains. Each time a token is taken off the board, it's added to the "Moonlight Board," counting down towards each of the three scoring rounds, letting players know which regions to prioritise. This ensures games are always focused on the next big place, but also gives players control of the game's pace, as manoeuvring and slowly amassing presence in regions rarely adds anything to the Moonlight track.

games but this game's twist on the formula, *The Wolves* provides a meaty challenge, as players must balance out the need to score points with the progression of their pack, taking care to not inadvertently lose precious wolves to an opponent when looking to seize control of a region that's about to score. Unfortunately, the moment there is any unbalance in player experience, we found it's the weaker players who suffer the most.

The best area control games ensure that players are always fighting first place, but here it's often best to prey on the ones worst off, who lack the board development or bonus tokens to retaliate, snatching away their precious pieces and denying them a

regions by creating dens and lairs, achieved through exploiting other wolves into service via tactical howling. However, instead of exterminating your opponents, it's more "expropriating" (no it doesn't quite match the definition but hush) their wolves and dens through dominating barks. I'm not quite sure how one claims a den by screaming at it, but believe me you'll be heartbroken when it happens to you.

Each action requires you to flip a set number of personal terrain tiles that each match the hex you're targeting, with five of the six being double-sided with different terrains and one faction specific token that always matches your type of wolf (i.e. The Forest Wolf player will find it easier to build dens or recruit/steal wolves that are on Forest tiles.) This constant flip-flopping requires you to think multiple moves

As you recruit new wolves or create more dens, you slowly improve your wolf pack's capabilities, letting you move more wolves across further distances in a single action, helping catapult you from a few stray dogs to a field of furry friends rapidly. Players are incentivised to grow packs rapidly and broaden their capabilities, as doing so will also net you one-use tokens that will let you perform extra actions on a turn of your choice or even count as wild terrain tokens, suddenly opening new actions that could catch your opponent unaware.

In a game where all players are equally familiar (or unfamiliar) with not only area control strategy

chance to claw their way back. I've lost games of this simply because I felt bad about taking from someone who was already struggling to recover.

If your table is happy to be cutthroat and revel in what my friend calls "crab bucketing," you'll struggle to find a game as mesmerising to bask in as this, but make sure your playgroup is prepared to be mean, otherwise the only howling you'll hear is someone pleading to play something else instead. 🐾

MATTHEW VERNALL

PLAY IT? MAYBE

The design delivers superbly on theme and can be a challenging area control game, but it's often cruel to players who are already falling behind.

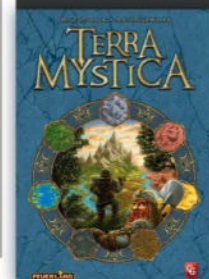


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Instructions
- ▶ 11 Modular board tiles
- ▶ 5 Reference cards
- ▶ 5 Double-sided player boards
- ▶ 30 Double-sided terrain tiles
- ▶ Moonlight board
- ▶ 60 Wolf wooden meeples
- ▶ 80 Den/Lair wooden tokens
- ▶ 128 Cardboard tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TERRA MYSTICA...

If you love this fantasy heavy-weight (in both mechanics and sheer volume of wooden components) but struggle to get it to the table, *The Wolves* might offer that perfect stepping stone to get players enjoying games about manipulating environments to outwit their opponents.



MICROMACRO: CRIME CITY – ALL IN

A repeat offender

Designer: Johannes Sich | Publisher: Edition Spielwiese

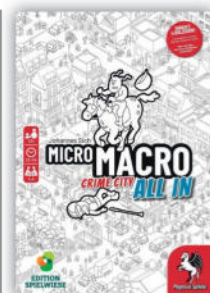


In less than two years, *MicroMacro: Crime City* has gone from a one-off, Spiel des Jahres Game of the Year winner to a can't-print-'em-fast-enough trilogy – *All In* being the third instalment. It's been hard to avoid, but for those who have missed the series it's a look-and-find detective co-operative played out on a cutesy monochrome map. Putting it more plainly, it's *Where's Wally* set in the underworld. With quirkier characters. With clue cards. Yet with fewer stripy jumpers.

The game probably best appeals to children, who are not only generally more observant than adults, but also have fewer back twinges and functioning eyesight (there is a lot of stooping over and squinting at the city map, unless you tack it to the wall). However, and here comes the rub: children need to be older because the cases can get rather dark... poisonings, armed robbery, wigs made from murdered people's hair and death by piano being just some of the previous cases.

Unlike in the original, the instruction booklet has since developed to acknowledge the disconnect between theme and potential players by warning parents on the suitability of each case with a handy icon system. This helpful and much-needed development is back again for *All In*. The general rule is kids aged 10+ shouldn't be scarred for life, but judgement is advised as children vary wildly. Only two cases here are at the top level (content considered explicit – an implied brothel/strip joint, in one scenario), so families should get plenty of play without hearing anything too disturbing. Otherwise, it is 'playful' crimes like pumpkin sabotage or bobble-hat theft.

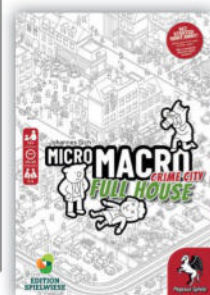
By good fortune, this reviewer is parent to a level-headed 10-year-old, who is yet to commit any major offenses having played previous *MicroMacros*. And this is a 10-year-old with such moral certainty and self-possession, he offered to contribute to the review. Over to Corrado...



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ City map
- ▶ 120 Case cards
- ▶ 16 Envelopes
- ▶ Magnifying glass, with sticker

LAST ISSUE'S SUBSCRIBER GIFT WAS EXTRA CASES FOR ALL IN. SUBSCRIBE NOW NOT TO MISS OUT



"*MicroMacro: Crime City – All In* is a really enjoyable family game. The smartest mechanic is when you follow characters, who are key to the crime, around to solve the cases. I find this to be like a time machine as if you are going forward and backwards in time. Another part I really like is the Easter eggs that have been included for people who've played before – mainly spotting characters from the other games.

"The illustration style is as funny as ever and is drawn in a way that is less scary for innocent eyes. I also liked seeing new parts of the city not shown before, like the racecourse, mansions and allotment – although the mini golf course is my favourite. It's good that this is the third version because once you've played the cases you probably won't do them again. I would encourage anyone who likes puzzling games to buy *All In*."

Helpfully, the young critic has hit upon a point worth discussing for those new to the franchise.

MicroMacro is arguably more of a puzzle than a traditional board game. So beyond dividing North, South, East and West to avoid clashing heads when searching for clues, there's not any real strategy needed. Just a sturdy core and 20/20 vision.

All In essentially offers more of the same as *MicroMacro* numbers one and two (aka *Full House*). Fans are unlikely to be disappointed, whereas newcomers won't have needed to have played before to get the gist. The jury remains out on whether the series is a puzzle rather than a game, but it does find *All In* guilty of fun on all charges. ●

JENNY AND CORRADO COX

PLAY IT? YES

The crime keeps on coming with *MicroMacro's* trademark dark wit. With new pockets of the city to discover and Easter eggs for those who've been there from the start, the trilogy looks ripe to become a... a... whatever the word is for four things.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: MICROMACRO: CRIME CITY – FULL HOUSE

Obviously, also try if you liked the first *MicroMacro: Crime City* too. But both *Full House* and *All In* share the same family friendly icon guide: handy for avoiding stuttering explanations about non-PG content.

FOUR HUMOURS

Good humoured fun

Designer: Charlie McCarron | **Publisher:** Adam's Apple Games



Before the miracles of modern medicine, diagnoses of illness and behavioural traits were guided by theories on humorism. Applying such theories to myself – whereby pains and personality traits can be determined through identification of imbalances in four bodily fluids – would likely turn up an excess of black bile and phlegm (nice), indicating a touch of melancholy and reservedness. Unfortunately, nowadays – unlike the hues of these particular fluids – things aren't so black-and-white. But for a moment, lets step back to a time when humorism was in its heyday.

Four Humours is an area-majority game of deduction and bluffing set in a pastel-painted, anglo-esque medieval kingdom. As doctors of the middle-ages, players will be competing for medical fame, travelling the kingdom and swaying the favour of citizens with demonstrations of humorist expertise. From nuns to knights, every citizen displays a personality crisis occurring between two of the four humours, one which players must resolve in order to exert their influence within the kingdom.

Each round follows a simple three-part structure. First, players will take turns choosing one of four tokens drawn from an initial bag of twenty, and placing it upon one of the many

citizens spread across the four or five jumbo-sized Scene cards. After this, winners for each Scene card are determined, with the winning tokens hopping over to the matching spots on the Kingdom boards where they'll count towards fulfilling the particular spatial requirements of objective cards. Finally, there's a brief clean up phase where players check for completed objectives and replenish Scene cards.

The tokens players will be using represent the potions used for balancing out the titular four humours and their symptoms; choleric, sanguine, melancholic, and phlegmatic. Once on Scene cards, they're revealed and resolved based on the 'principles of personality' – a unique ranking system responsible for conjuring *Four Humours'* surprisingly deep deduction, decision making, and bluffing. Essentially, if a single choleric token is present in a scene it will win, if not, two or more sanguine will. If the Scene is still contested, two melancholic will win – or a lone one will sneak off to a neighbouring location. If all else fails, any remaining phlegmatic tokens will claim the Scene.

Obviously, such a system can result in several players winning the same location – somewhat rare in typical area-majority standoffs – but this helps keep things tense by leaving objectives tantalisingly within reach of all players

throughout the game. Ratcheting this tension and unpredictability further still are the Party tiles. These are essentially bonus Scenes populated with tokens as normal but immediately resolved when objectives are completed. Often this leads to a chain reaction of Parties, with winning tokens most people will have forgotten about or ignored suddenly springing upon the map. What usually results from this is a snowballing, riotous conclusion as when the final Party is resolved the game ends.

Despite supporting up to six, *Four Humours* works fantastically with just two, remaining tense and unpredictable – a feat that's typically hard to pull off in similar games. Furthermore, the game's clean mechanics have enabled the inclusion of an equally engrossing 'Fiefdom Mode'. Whilst playing very similarly, this alternative mode adds some interesting changes to both aesthetics and mechanics which are well worth a look.



It's unfortunate but I predict *Four Humours* will likely slip through the gaps left by more immediately exciting titles. As such, the game has the feel of an indie gem, its quirkiness and aesthetic sitting well between the likes of *Paupers Ladder* and *Feudum*. But, if you get a chance, don't let it pass you by, as this area-majority game competes with the best of them. **CHAD WILKINSON**

PLAY IT? YES

Quietly quirky, refreshingly original, and tensely competitive without feeling overly mean.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 120 Potions
- ▶ 24 Objective markers
- ▶ 6 Potion bags
- ▶ 5 Scene markers
- ▶ 6 Game boards
- ▶ 6 Party tiles
- ▶ 36 Scene cards
- ▶ 12 Objective cards
- ▶ 6 Reference cards
- ▶ Solo mode card



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FEUDUM

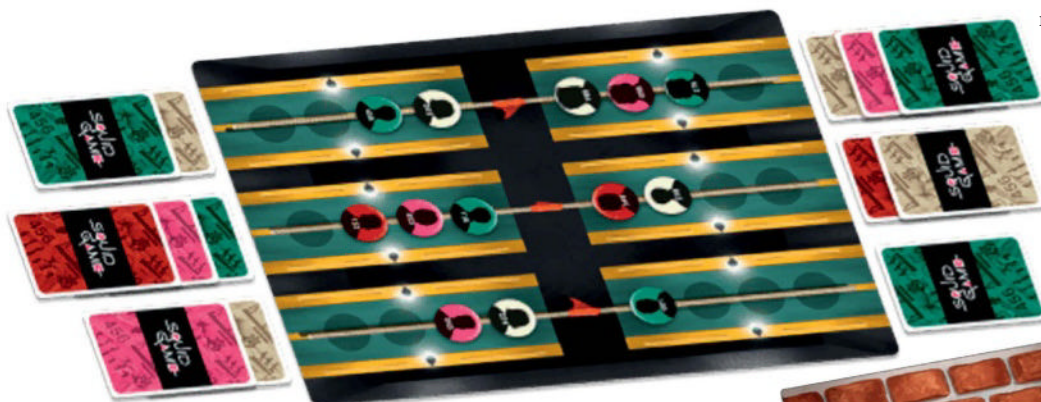
A thankfully far lighter foray into medieval whimsy.



SQUID GAME

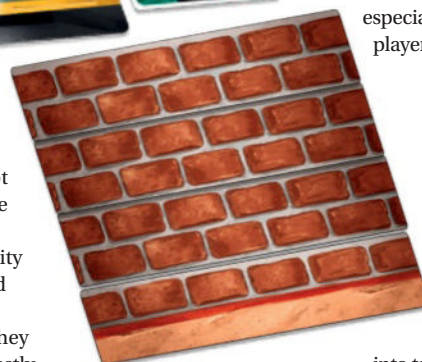
Top shelf series, bottom shelf game

Designer: Nicholas Cravotta, Rebecca Bleau, Skylar Cravottableau | **Publisher:** Mixlore



round though lies in the mix of luck and strategy when determining the order in which players advance and how best to utilise cards to both move and ultimately push other tokens.

As mentioned, the game employs a lot of luck in its basic card play and tile flipping. At high player counts this is actually quite fun, especially when players of eliminated



teams transform

into taunting,

yelping audiences, but presenting a bit more of a challenge would've kept the game interesting. As it stands, the game lessens in excitement with repeat plays, particularly with the same players.

Whilst it's unfair to ask a licensed board game to deliver on its theme with significant depth, we can generally hope for more than a limply enthused uttering of 'Oh, I remember this bit.' Where the show excelled at pulling off an incongruous merging of moral bleakness and aesthetic vibrancy, the game decides to forgo both whilst also sapping away the sense of provocative violence, moral injustice, and threat. On the plus side this does expand the target market to younger players too. Just don't expect them to have much fun. 📉

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? NO

A flat feeling party game offering short-lived fun for some fans of the show.

Basing a game on a popular intellectual property is difficult, translating that property's reflection or incitement of a cultural moment is even more challenging. But in a completely un-satirical leap of opportunism, Netflix sanctioned the production of a number of licensed board games to capitalise on – including *Squid Game*. With the show – and its stylishly violent critique of class inequality and rampant capitalism – coming out amidst a near universal haze of post-lockdown public cynicism, the question is, how much of this does it capture, and at the very least, is it any good?

In *Squid Game: Let the Games Begin*, players will be guiding a team of faceless, numbered participant tokens through six of the show's games in the hopes of reaching the contest's end with at least one of their expendable crew surviving. Heavily reliant on luck, and occasionally pushing it, *Let the Games Begin* falls within the genre confines of party games, with its simple (though badly explained) rules and rowdy moments of tension and competition.

Being a show about children's games – albeit with a deadly spin – one might expect this to work fairly well. Unfortunately, *Squid Game's* challenges were of the more physical, playground variety, making their tabletop rendering feel pointless and pedestrian. The most glaring



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 2 Boards
- ▶ 72 Team Tokens
- ▶ 36 Player Cards
- ▶ 7 Doll Cards
- ▶ 11 Dalgona Cards
- ▶ 24 Squid Cards
- ▶ 2 Marble Tokens
- ▶ 8 Glass Bridge Tiles
- ▶ 4 Mannequin and Wall Strips
- ▶ Timer
- ▶ 2 Timer Markers
- ▶ Speed Token



example of this is the game's uninspired attempt at 'Marbles', a game played out exactly the same as in reality but with cardboard imitations that fall apart easier than they slot together. Honestly, no one should endure the disappointment of tossing a marble that won't roll.

'Red Light Green Light' is a basic game of luck and probability, with players playing numbered cards to edge toward the towering doll. If a green card is revealed from the doll deck players are safe, red cards on the other hand will eliminate a token from anyone who played a card matching the depicted number. It's a fairly tense but mostly lacklustre introduction to the game.

The penultimate game of 'Glass Bridge' redeems itself somewhat by replicating the tension and overall look of the show, albeit at a diluted and censored level. Here, players will be lining up before a row of flippable tiles – their reverse depicting platforms which are either safe or shattered – before playing cards to cautiously venture across.

The most interesting aspect of this

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED JUNK ART

A similar compilation of competitive mini-games, just worse and less replay-able.

SKATE SUMMER

Does it stick the landing?

Designer: Randy Reiman | Publisher: Pandasaurus



Once every 25 years, someone decides skateboarding should be popular. Fevered children pester parents for a board but before you can say gnarly, 99 per cent of them have been resigned to the shed as we wait for the start of the next cycle. We're still waiting. But that hasn't stopped Pandasaurus bringing us *Skate Summer*, a suitably garish game of tricks, big air, and combos.

Don't get me wrong. I like an underused theme, and skateboarding is a compelling idea for a board game. The bright cartoon artwork fits, although some of the cardboard chits are too small and the board is horribly busy. While there are lots of bits in the box, £50 feels steep. So, do you get bang for your bucks or does *Skate Summer* crash and bail?

This is a push-your-luck game that sticks to the advertised 60-minutes, which feels right for the game. The first phase of each round sees you simultaneously playing Trick cards to tableau, each giving a reward while affecting your balance. A dice-based balance check follows each card play, after which players can take what they have or push their luck and play another card. Another dice is added after each card played, increasing the chance of falling. If you do fall, you lose a small amount of the currencies you've picked up, plus your final card played.

Most Trick cards reward you with Goal or Flame tokens. Goal tokens come in three types, which work as majorities scoring at the end of the game. Goal tokens can be spent to either skill-up, increasing the points value of each Trick card of a colour (they come in three colours). Or you can save them for phase two, to buy more Goal tokens by moving around the board. This is done by using your successful Trick cards from phase one to move on coloured spaces.

Rinse and repeat the process until one player hits the set game-end score, then add the majorities scoring to finish.

The balance system and push-your-luck card and dice play do a great job of getting the theme across. Simultaneous play keeps a good pace to the phase, while the mechanism does something original with familiar concepts. You have decisions to make, competing for majorities or going for skill points. And it feels as if you're involved, making meaningful choices. But when it comes to the board phase, the wheels start to come off the

mitigating it, meaning it can be hard to come back from one bad turn, and practically impossible from two.

Some kind of take-that element, rather than bog standard majority scoring, would've made the game a real hoot. Especially as interaction usually helps create replayability. Instead, as *Skate Summer* has little in terms of depth, you quickly start to feel you're going through the motions, especially as there is no comeback mechanism (which, again, interaction may have helped with). Which is all the more disappointing because the core ideas are really solid.



Skateboard Summer experience. It feels laboured, tacked on, and uninspired, while losing momentum as you work out how to eke out a few bonuses.

There's a lot of luck involved in the fun parts of the game. There's a 50-50 chance which way the balance dice will shift you. Then there's the random card draws, meaning you don't know if the skill colour you boosted will end up in your hand. If you fall, while I have a lucky first run getting lots of cards, skill ups, and gain some nice board bonuses, you're a round behind and worse still I'm in better shape all round. Unfortunately, the board play magnifies this rather than

Skate Summer is too fiddly to be a good kid's game, while there's not enough here to keep most gamers happy for long. What could've been a nice, light small-box filler is instead a bloated big-box game with little to offer long-term. Skating fans could get a kick out of it for a bit longer, and it may work as a gateway game for skater buddies. But for most it will probably end up at the back of the shed with your old skateboard. 🛹

CHRIS MARLING

PLAY IT? MAYBE



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Main game board
- ▶ 5 player boards
- ▶ 150 small cards
- ▶ 11 dice
- ▶ 25 plastic pieces
- ▶ 250+ cardboard chits

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BAD COMPANY...

For fans of light and quick thematic games such as *Bad Company* this might stick the landing.





WILDSTYLE

Let's play tag!

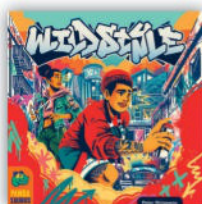
Designer: Peter Ridgeway | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games



In *Wildstyle*, you are part of a graffiti-spraying crew tagging city streets. The goal is to tag more than your rival crews. Although the exact location is unspecified, the city depicted on the district-based board looks distinctly NYC. Called "the map", the board is pieced together by sections that match the number of players at the table. On each is a hive of hexagons with various symbols that represent places to tag – railways, parks and so on – each worth a different number of points. Suffice to say that scribbling on the police station carries the greatest reward.

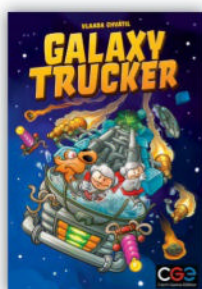
Tagging takes place via set collection. Snaffle three of the same icon and you can place one of your tokens on a corresponding hex. There are restrictions on how many cards can be held at any one time to add difficulty. Objectives also add greater depth, whether it's trying to occupy the borders between districts or create snaking paths between train stations.

By far, the most challenging part of *Wildstyle* is also the most exhilarating.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 5 District boards
- ▶ 6 Objective tiles
- ▶ 4 Share pile cards
- ▶ 28 Cop car tokens
- ▶ 5 Crew mats
- ▶ 90 Crew tags
- ▶ 115 Location cards
- ▶ 5 Reference cards



Play takes place simultaneously – discarding unwanted cards, picking up new ones, placing tags – and although only one action is permitted at a time, there is no pause in between to take a breath. Each of the three rounds therefore moves at breakneck speed, capturing that feeling of being on the move to avoid the cops, just like real-life taggers.

Everyone has a personal draw pile, but anyone can take from it, which adds to the frantic feel. You'll be forgiven for wanting to slap greedy hands reaching across the table – don't – just do it back. Unwanted cards can be discarded into one of three or four piles (player dependent). The only stipulation is they are matched by either icon or colour – something younger players will recognise from *Uno*. That simplicity is so effective here yet hides a subtle depth: place three icons on top of

each other and you've just helped the opposition quickly collect a whole set. Damn it.

Speed may be key, but sometimes going too fast means you miss what other people are up to. And that can be fatal if you want to stop them from achieving an objective. One makes a nod to another children's game, *Connect 4*. Again, you'll be put through your paces to keep an eye on everything that's going on around you.

It's fair to say that real-world tags are pretty uninspiring to look at. Anyone who's seen Helch's work on the M25 Chalfont Viaduct will likely agree. *Wildstyle* doesn't suffer from that problem and stays true to its title. The colours and illustrations have much more in common with 1980s mural pieces than indecipherable scrawls in black or white. Die-cut cop cars – used as a get-ahead, but also an end-game point reducer – pop with an energetic and witty picture. Individual playing boards – where you'll stash cards while collecting – are done by colour, but in a smart way that's loyal to the theme. The game comes from the house of *Dinosaur Island/World* which has credentials in meshing its subject matters and visuals.

Only one thing is missing, and it's sadly a boring but necessary practicality – a scoresheet and pen. Points are picked up in more than one way from places tagged, objectives achieved – AND there's adding involved – so it's a bit much to do in your head, especially when there's multiple players. It's nothing a sheet of A4 doesn't solve, but it lacks the game's panache.

Wildstyle is a dynamic play that tests observation and decision-making skills under pressure. It's quick to learn and teach with enough nuance to get players thinking. Could it be a new favourite? The writing's on the wall. 🟡

JENNY COX

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Wildstyle takes familiar elements from kids' classics and reimagines them in an unexpected way. The pacing, mechanics and theming all come together with a flair that makes designer Peter Ridgeway one to watch.

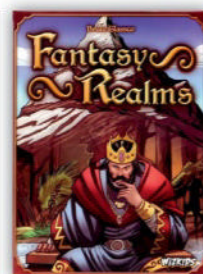
TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: GALAXY TRUCKER

Played in a technicolour real time, *Galaxy Trucker* and *Wildstyle* are cousins once removed by intergalactic travel.

FANTASY REALMS

The crazy combo-building classic returns

Designer: Bruce Glassco | Publisher: Wizkids



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 95 Cards
- ▶ 100+ Full art card sleeves
- ▶ Scorepad



addictive replayability. Drawing cards can either be done from the top of the deck or from the discards spread face-up across the table. Each choice has its own ramifications; taking a face-up card gives your opponents' clues as to what sort of cards may already be in hand, whilst drawing from the deck ultimately results in adding a card to the discards as opposed to merely replacing one. This is important as the growing discard line acts as a rather unreliable timer, with ten cards signalling the final whistle. Consequently, the discard area behaves like a landscape on a fault-line, suddenly thrusting upwards between moments of calm plateaus.

This novel timer also has its tactical uses, particularly when players happy with their hands exploit the draw deck in an attempt to rush the discards over the finish line. Elsewhere, tactics are reliant on the careful observation of what other players are taking and ensuring your own strategies remain your own – it's no fun clutching onto a King and a Queen only to realise that someone else at the table is snatching up every Army, essentially sapping away at a bunch of bonus points.

Unlike mounds of chits, tokens, meeples, and minis, there's nothing immediately threatening about a deck of cards, and subsequently this makes *Fantasy Realms* a perfect gateway-game. It's fun, simple, and deep, but on the other hand not cheap. Then again, if you're looking for a game playable by near enough anyone, or just fancy upgrading a battered old copy, it's not hard to find value here. 📌

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

A modern classic, revamped to entice even more players to the hobby.



Give me a standard deck of playing cards and I'll give you a hundred ways to play with them. Well, not me, but someone could. In the contemporary gaming scene, designers have picked up on this inherent blend of minimalism and flexibility, simultaneously expanding upon and moving away from the basic 52 card deck to create similarly compact but endlessly varied modern tabletop experiences. Some are overwhelmingly vast (*Magic: The Gathering*), others are wonderfully inventive (*Oh My Goods*), but the ones of most value to the hobby are those striking that perfect balance of simplicity and depth. *Fantasy Realms* is one of those games: staggeringly easy to teach with an emergent depth and cleverness that's sure to beckon most who play it towards the gates of our curious hobby.

Fitting into the sub-genre of 'draw and discard' – a term which more or less explains the whole rules – *Fantasy Realms* casts three to six players (although the rules include an excellent two-player variant) in

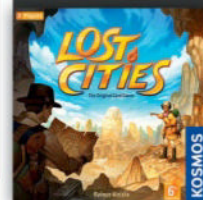
the roles of mighty rulers, building up their kingdoms one card at a time. By amassing the likes of wizards, beasts, armies, and mountains, players will gradually transform their seven card hands into compact distillations of power, replete with unique synergies varying from game to game.

Originally appearing back in 2017, *Fantasy Realms* quickly took the hobby by storm with its lightning quick gameplay and ever-so-satisfying combo-building, despite some mostly widespread aversion to its generic theming and art. This new deluxe edition keeps that same snappy gameplay (with some bundled in expansion content) but polishes the overall look with new art, a graphical overhaul, and snazzy custom card sleeves.

The game flows extremely smoothly, with each turn simply requiring players to draw one card and then discard one. Within this barebones framework though, important decisions and hopeful possibilities are aplenty – which accounts for *Fantasy Realms* seriously

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED LOST CITIES...

A great multiplayer alternative to this Knizia classic.



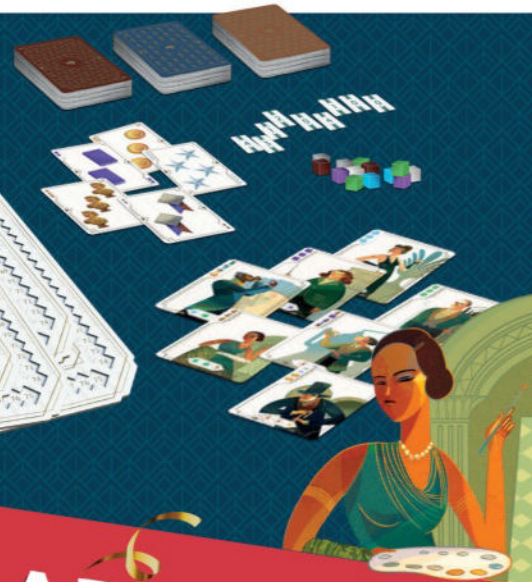
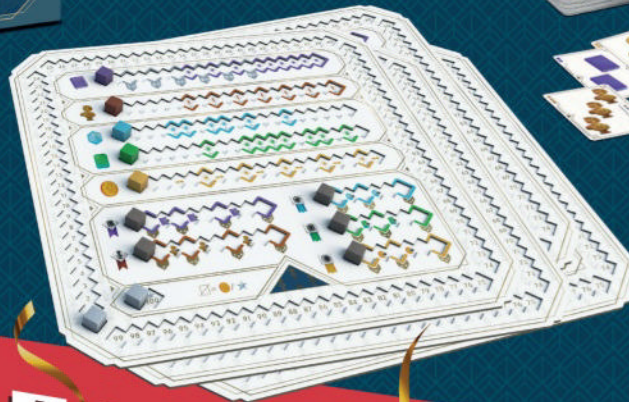
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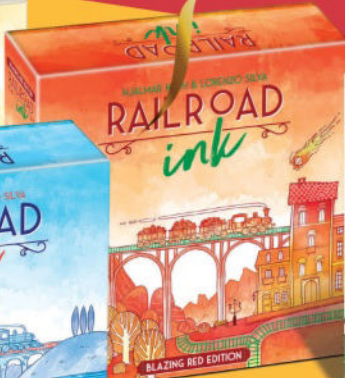
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TILETUM

Putting the tile in Tiletum

Designer: David Tascini & Simone Luciani | **Publisher:** Board & Dice



Stop me if you've heard this one before. It's Renaissance Europe. You're playing as a merchant, and there's quite a bit of beige on the board. There are resources to collect such as wool, stone, and iron. And you can use them to get victory points in a variety of ways. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the latest in dicey, tiley, action selection euro games. But is *Tiletum* worth your tile-time?

A game of *Tiletum* plays over four rounds during which each player selects and uses three dice, each gaining them both resources and actions. In addition, there are a number of tasks players can do at any time during a turn. Each round ends with a fair, where players who have a presence in the city holding it can score bonus points. But while the game mechanics are pretty standard for any euro gamer, what makes the game delicious is the puzzle of putting together a successful round.

Each dice equates to seven rewards – resources matching the colour and number of the dice (so a yellow four is four gold), plus action points equating to seven minus the dice number (so gaining four resources means you'll have three action points). An action wheel decides which dice number equates to each action and this moves one space clockwise after each round, meaning you know which actions will be strong throughout the game.

Two of the actions allow you to move your merchant or architect around the board, collect tiles from the locations they move through, or place houses or pillars in them if space permits. Having your merchant or a house present in a city at the end of a round allows you to take part in fair scoring. While a pillar allows you to contribute to its cathedral for victory points.

Two actions allow you to buy tiles. Contract tiles are simply completed for victory points, while characters give a variety of small bonuses and can increase the action points you get for their associated action. This is



dependent on completing houses on your player board, for which you'll also need family crests (found as bonus, character, or contract tiles). There's also a king action, which seems to be a boring afterthought, plus a joker action that allows you to do any other action.

While there's a decent amount of mitigation in *Tiletum* you can find yourself frustrated by bad luck. Unless you have a particularly aggressive group, there's unlikely to be a great deal of deliberate blocking. Races to house spots are definitely a feature not a bug. But otherwise, it's more likely others take dice you need before you. While frustrating, it's all part of the puzzle.

Which brings us to the 60-100 minute suggested playtime on the box. It is certainly possible with one or two players but forget it with three and four. In fact, unless you really love the game, I'd suggest forgetting about playing it with four at all. So much can change between turns it is impossible to plan your next move with any certainty. And with so much choice available, and ways to do the same thing with varying levels of efficiency, a bit of analysis paralysis is actually



essential if you want to do well.

Unfortunately, some of the component choices don't help. Three of the dice colours are very similar. Even more annoying is the lack of a player aid, which the game desperately needs. Luckily someone has already put a good one on Board Game Geek, but it is a poor oversight.

But these things don't stop *Tiletum* from being an excellent Eurogame. At two it plays fast enough to overlook potential randomness issues, while you can remove a dice of each colour to show resource colours (which also reduces dice randomness). But with each extra player, the game loses some potency.

CHRIS MARLING

PLAY IT? YES



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Main board
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 20 Dice
- ▶ Dice bag
- ▶ 80 Wooden pieces
- ▶ 200+ Cardboard tiles and tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ORIGINS: FIRST BUILDERS...

If you're a fan of dice-powered Eurogames like *Origins: First Builders* you're in for a treat with *Tiletum*.





TERRA NOVA

Welcome to Euro Games 101

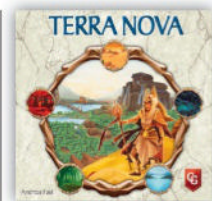
Designer: Andreas Faul | Publisher: Capstone Games



Terra *Mystica*, on which *Terra Nova* is based, has been around for a decade. It received high praise on release and has continued to garner it ever since, regularly featuring in 'best strategy games of all time' lists. Its mechanisms spawned sci-fi spin-off *Gaia Project*, which now sits even higher on many of those lists. So, with such lofty heritage, what does *Terra Nova* hope to bring to the party?

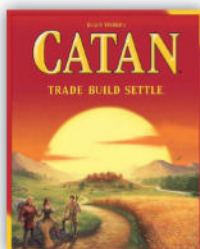
The simple answer is probably volume sales. The hobby is growing, but the family market is where real sales are found. I'm a fan of both *Gaia Project* and *Terra Mystica*, but both are heavy Eurogames. There are lots of moving parts to consider on every move, requiring high levels of strategic and tactical play throughout. *Terra Nova* offers a shorter, lighter game that attempts to keep the core mechanisms while cutting much of the fat.

In *Terra Nova* you play as one of 10 asymmetric factions, expanding your influence across the map. Each faction must terraform land to make it habitable for their species, then build on it to create towns. Buildings come in three types, giving income per round. Houses can be



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 5 double-sided faction boards
- ▶ 200 cardboard tiles and tokens
- ▶ 100 wooden pieces
- ▶ 7 overview cards



upgraded to trading posts and then palaces, each giving better income or bonuses. There are no battles, as once you've built on a space it is yours. This creates plenty of semi-passive conflict, as you vie to grab land before your opponents. Groups of buildings form towns which give strong bonuses and points, while the players with the largest groups of connected buildings also get decent end game points.

The game plays over five rounds, each having a randomised way to score points such as building houses or terraforming. You know all five bonuses from the beginning, so it's possible to plan to do those actions in the right rounds to grab points. Each player also chooses a bonus tile each round. These give extra resources and/or points in the same way round scoring tiles do. Plus, you can score for increasing your shipping ability (allowing you to settle on tiles not directly connected to you) and sometimes from your faction's unique ability. A round lasts until everyone has passed, normally because you've run out of resources to pay for actions.

In comparison to *Terra Mystica*, the component quality is as impressive as the original. The boards, wooden pieces and cardboard tokens are pleasingly chunky, the iconography easy to understand, and the overview cards clear and helpful. The art is a little more cartoony than the original, but equally beautifully done. The rulebook is clear and concise, and includes the dropout turn order variant the original lacked. There are also a couple of two-player variants, giving ways to add neutral houses to the play board for a more rounded experience.

The biggest changes in *Terra Nova* are the removal of two key currencies and a building type. Workers and priests are gone, as are the temples and cult board. Everything on your player board simply costs money. The power token system is retained as-was, minus the opportunity to sacrifice from bowl two (you have eight power tokens throughout). But it is still spent in first come, first served main board action spaces to gain money, terraforming, bridges or sailing reach.

Consequently, much of the high-level strategic richness is gone, leaving you to focus tactically on using your faction's special ability and the round bonuses to generate points. But as a simplified, streamlined version of one of the hobby's best games, it works extremely well. Cash is king, so it feels everyone is trying to get as many buildings out as possible to maximise income. This means *Nova* is unlikely to convert any *Mystica* fans, as it is a little one-dimensional in comparison. But it's designed to be. What it does well is introduce core Euro concepts to new gamers, playing fast but enjoyably thinky in a gorgeous package. There are still lots of choices to make and the tension builds nicely. And if the game helps more new players enter our fabulous hobby, I'm fully behind it. 🍷

CHRIS MARLING

PLAY IT? YES

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CATAN...

If you are looking to make the next step up into hobby strategy games.



THE PALACES OF CARRARA

Finding your marbles

Designer: Wolfgang Kramer and Michael Kiesling | **Publisher:** Game Brewer



Whilst you may never have heard of Carrara marble, it's highly probable you have seen it. Having been mined since Alexander the Great's domination, it features in world-renowned landmarks including Rome's Pantheon, Oslo's Opera House and London's Marble Arch. Even Michelangelo was a fan of working with it. Now it's your turn to handle with care in *The Palaces of Carrara*.

Players work by royal decree to zhuzh up Tuscany's architecture. Each person works as an independent designer, buying different grades of marble from the communal market to transform into ascending grades of building in the cities of their choice. Victory points are earned throughout the game – the exact time decided by the player – as well as at game's end, if playing the advanced iteration. There can only be one winning design per city, however, so knowing when to score your marbled wonders is an art in itself.

Feeling a tingly sense of déjà vu? This is a second edition of the 2012 game by the same moniker. Now there's the addition of statues (perfectly cut meeples that earn extra victory points) plus a more complex advanced game. These small tweaks effectively fine tune what was already a tight little engine. Yet enough years have passed to reconsider the game in its entirety, as many of us will have missed this gem first time around.

For a game about aesthetics, *The Palaces of Carrara* is very easy on the eye. The board comes in technicolour (there's a real Dorothy in Oz moment when you unfold it having just lifted the pale, marble-effect box) with matching building blocks to represent the various types of marble. The screens are also elaborately designed and grander than they need to be for hiding money/marble from nosy neighbours.

This is beauty that runs more than skin deep, though, with some gorgeous mechanisms. The wheel being one. It serves as a market for the marble building blocks and is divided into six segments. Throughout the game, players can turn the wheel to affect the value of the blocks within segments making each cheaper (and sometimes even free!). If a player completes a 360 on their go, the blocks go back up in value. Turning the wheel at the wrong time often proves to be the right time for a subsequent player, posing interesting dilemmas. The wheel plays a greater role in the advanced game, where decorations and/or statues can be claimed for free when clearing a segment – making buildings even more stupendous.

The Palaces of Carrara's crowning glory is that players choose when to score their creations using one of the eight scoring markers. It may feel illogical to cash in a city or building type

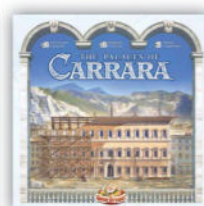
early doors but it's crucial for generating funds after the initial 20 florin is spent (would have been nice if these were metal, rather than card). The cities can only be scored by one person so beating other players requires holding fire and striking at the right second. It's tense, and gripping, stuff.

The rule book is adamant the basic game be mastered first before upgrading, and while it is useful to grasp the fundamentals, one shot should be enough. More experimenting may be desired on getting the numbers right: although this functions as a two-player affair, there are often landslide results as one person bagsies most of the building-improvement advantages (which increase victory points or money earned on a city). In three/four player sittings, the improvements are more evenly spread and players tread on each other's toes by competing for the same cities – making victory even sweeter.

In summary, *The Palaces of Carrara* is thoughtfully sculpted both visually and technically with much to marvel at, like the real-world marble itself. **JENNY COX**

PLAY IT? YES

Easy to grasp yet dense enough to challenge, *The Palaces of Carrara* is almost as solid as rock. The two-player game reveals some cracks, but this is otherwise the sort of smart offering you'd expect from gaming dons Kramer and Kiesling.

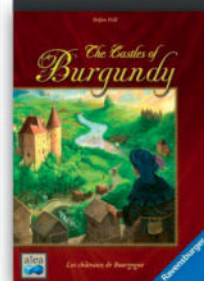


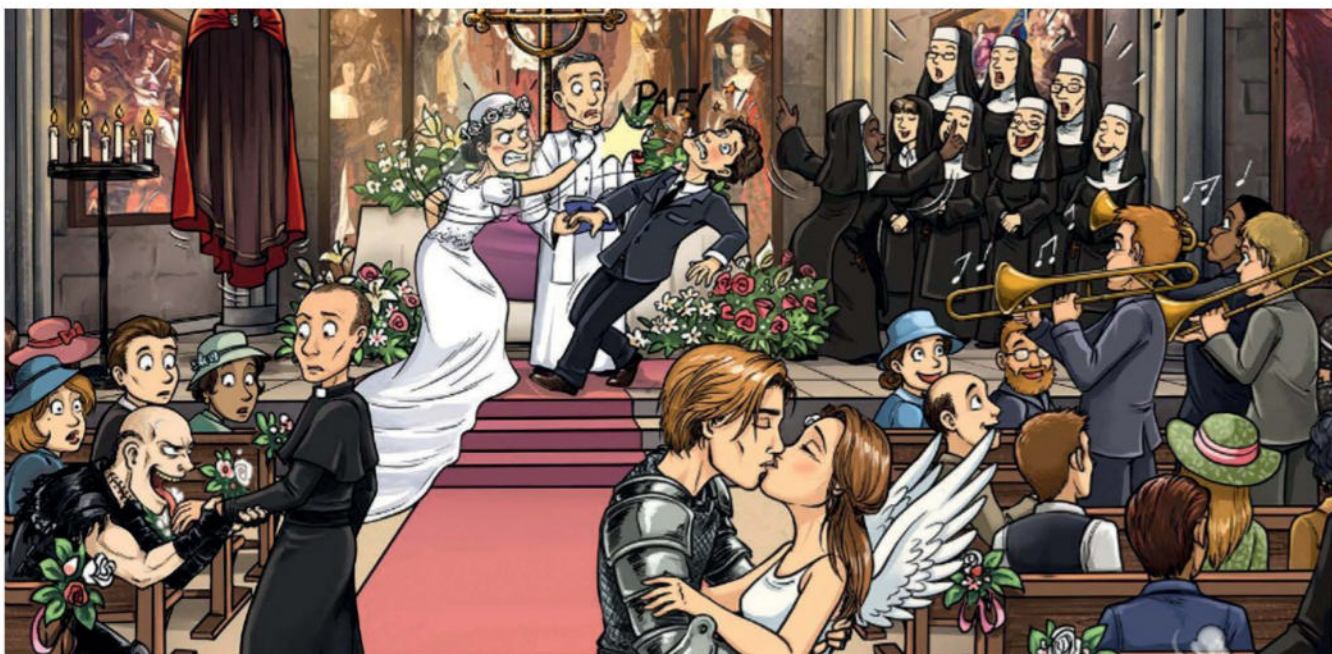
WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board with wheel base
- ▶ 2 Double-sided wheels
- ▶ 36 Building tiles
- ▶ 6 Monument tiles
- ▶ 8 Improvement tiles
- ▶ 4 Double-sided player boards
- ▶ 63 Florin coins
- ▶ 42 Building blocks
- ▶ Building block bag
- ▶ 32 Scoring markers
- ▶ 8 Victory point markers
- ▶ 4 Screens
- ▶ Double-sided royal court board
- ▶ Royal visit marker
- ▶ 42 Decorations
- ▶ 44 Statues

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THE CASTLES OF BURGUNDY...

Not far geographically or mechanically, travel between Italy and France to get your fill of set collecting, point-scoring twists and old-world glory.





MOVIE MIND

Better than Netflix roulette

Designer: Boris Uzan | **Publisher:** Gigamic



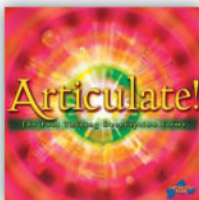
Movie Mind is so much better than it sounds on paper. I can tell you that it's a game of picking out the movie references from a Where's Wally style scene card to answer questions and get points. Every question is a bit like 'an animate movie that starts in London' or 'a movie that contains a big shark' and each scene is full to the brim of references. One of the cards, featured on the box, contains a sort-of Ursula from The Little Mermaid fighting a big robot from Pacific Rim while Ponyo (from the film of the same name) runs on the heads of some fish. It's pretty good, and you'll get a chuckle out of each set up. But you might be asking – where's the friction? Where's the weird game-feeling we all crave?

It's in your head. That's the answer. See, *Movie Mind* tickles a part of your brain that you use for long term storage of useless information. Watching a team of people try and untangle what they're seeing in front of them (someone in a gimp mask watching TV with an ogre (sort of) near a well with Wednesday Addams torturing a



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 80 Large illustrated scene cards
- ▶ 3 Team tokens
- ▶ Fan deck of 1440 questions
- ▶ Action token
- ▶ Sand timer
- ▶ 33 Points tokens



man behind, right next to someone in a dress with a knife, oh and spinning wheel and needle) with their own memories of films can be hilarious. They're just trying to find a film that contains fairies in amongst all of that. Memory and information recall works in mysterious ways, and the game plays on that. Will you notice the box of cracked egg shells next to the glass of raw eggs on the table in one scene? Will you put it together with the film Rocky? You might, but only once you're sat down with a little sand timer and told there's a film featuring running up a lot of stairs as a montage somewhere in front of you. Everyone starts to run off into their own movie theatre memory palaces and tries to pull together what exactly has triggers the memory of a particular film. It's great to watch, slight agony to do (or rather, fail to do) and simple enough to be played by everyone you might have at your table. The generational depth

of the films ensures it's good for fans of classics, while there's plenty of fairly modern children's films and animation to keep those at the other end of the spectrum happy too. If you're worried about replayability, don't – there's three team colours with different question sets on each, and as you're working across 80 cards there's plenty to go back for.

Movie Mind is a great after-dinner party game that everyone can get involved with, where you'll feel clever or dumb for getting or not getting it in equal measure. Either way, the wander through some of your favourite films with family and friends is a great way to spend an evening. 🍿

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

Movie Mind is a great, quick game that spans the generational gap (mostly) and is certainly worth cancelling your Netflix subscription for a couple of months for.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ARTICULATE...

The 'on the tip of my tongue' classic gets a visual update that scratches the same itch.

STAR TREK: MISSIONS

On my cue, launch photon snorepedos

Designer: Bruce Glassco | Publisher: Wizkids



Star Trek: Missions is a reworking of Kennerspiel des Jahres nominee *Fantasy Realms*, a simple set collection game about gathering a hand of cards with as many scoring synergies as possible. *ST:M* isn't a simple reskin of the original – it uses the same core mechanics, but the cards here are unique to the game.

Actual play is so simple as to seem almost like an afterthought – you start off with a hand of seven cards. Each turn, you draw one, then discard one. Your only choice is whether to draw from the main (or 'Galaxy') deck, the Mission deck, or the discard area. As soon as there are eight Galaxy cards or twelve Mission cards in the discard area, the game is over.

Cards from the main deck might be – occasionally eccentrically-chosen – characters from Star Trek: The Next Generation like Commander Riker or Lieutenant Worf, locations, systems on the Starship Enterprise, equipment or artifacts. Functionally, these work more or less the same way – they'll have a few tags down one side, which function a bit like suits, describing their faction affiliation, their speciality if they have one, and their lifeform type if they are one. At the bottom, some text describes what other cards you'll need in your final hand for this card to score you points.

These tend to be tangentially thematically-relevant cards – so Riker scores an extra seven points each if you've got the Transporter card, the Counsellor Deanna Troi card, and the Away Team card. Mission cards work the same way, except they're

not referenced by other cards – so while Riker might score you extra points because another card rewards you for having 'Command' cards and a third cares about 'Federation' cards, Mission cards have no types or specialties. At all times, you must have either one or two Mission cards in your hand.



ST:M is a stranger beast than the one created when Dr Crusher tried to cure Lieutenant Barclay's Urodolan flu and accidentally created a virus that made Counsellor Troi devolve into a wheezing bipedal frog. Gameplay is – depending on your perspective – minimalist or laughably perfunctory. The game ends when eight cards from the main deck are in the discard area. This means, in a six-player game, it's possible you'll draw a single card, discard one, and your game will be over. There's no balancing to account for this – some players just draw fewer cards than others.

Not all games emphasise player agency or interesting decisions, and that's fine. They're more like a watching a horse race or twisting a

kaleidoscope and seeing what patterns the shapes make as they fall. Simple mechanics mean anyone can join in, and that new or younger players have as much chance as veterans.

But what *Fantasy Realms* sold as a virtue – say 'draw a card, discard a card' and you've taught fifty percent of the game – doesn't hold when scoring relies on a fiddly, complex system of card identities and interwoven synergies. There's nothing simple or unintimidating about text like: '15 with at least one Federation card with Command AND at least two other cards with any Science symbol and different Command specialties from each other' to a gateway player.

For experienced gamers these synergies are crunchy and nuanced – a fantastic, gooey puzzle to sink your teeth into. Except, because most of the game sees you drawing blind off the top deck and even at lower player counts

you might get half a dozen turns at most, you've very little control over your hand. So all of those synergies, while clever, are mostly accidents.

The result is a cut-and-shut that's half Klingon Warbird, half pedal car. Newbies will bounce off the wall of symbols and scoring criteria. Seasoned gamers will feel locked out by nigh non-existent gameplay that would have been better replaced with almost any other mechanic – drafting, I-cut-you-choose, auctions, or even a mix. Sadly, the only mission *ST:M* fulfils is to take an award-nominated game and make it so-so. 🍷

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? NO

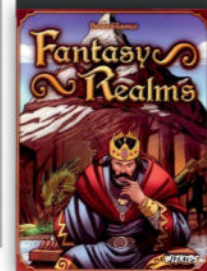


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 24 Mission cards
- ▶ 50 Galaxy cards
- ▶ Score pad

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FANTASY REALMS...

Clearly, if you got a kick out of the original *Fantasy Realms*, you're a die-hard Trekkie and you genuinely can't resist seeing how the two combine, you'll have to give this a whirl. But there is a universe of better game, simple card games and many better uses of the Star Trek licence.





DUNCAN RHODES' TWO THIN COATS PAINTS

I'll get my coat

Designer: Duncan Rhodes | **Publisher:** Trans Atlantis Games



I'm not much of a painter. I like to occasionally break out a set of quite beaten-up brushes and old and scavenged paint pots for a bit of relaxation though. Or when there's a set of very cool minis in a box. I previously relied on a set of Turbo Dork by Exit 23 (for weird effects) and some Scale75 (for normal stuff) to get through whatever it was I wanted to paint. And these were fun and interesting paints to use. Even the handful of donated Games



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 60 Paints in dropper bottles (£3.95 per bottle)
- Paint reference chart

Thin Coats set. The set is notable, down to the name (Duncan's Games Workshop period's instructional catchphrase), for the idea that it's directly challenging Games Workshop paints. There's even a reference and conversion chart included in the box we were sent. You can happily

follow the painting guides featured in Tabletop Gaming using *Two Thin Coats* with this. Whether these paints line up with the products they're aiming at isn't really my concern though. Because unlike any other paint I've used in the last few years, these made me better at painting.

I'd like to be able to ascribe this uptick in the quality of my work with the quality of the paint. Maybe there's very good quality of pigments, or the base that's being used in the mix being superior in one way or another. Except I don't truly understand that – I just know these paints do exactly what I want them to do.

They mix well without losing vibrancy, meaning you can do traditional colour transitions by adding in a white, or lighter colour, into the mix on the palette. Nearly everything can be happily made into a wash in a way that retains colours and runs into recesses nicely. I didn't test these with airbrushes or any modern styles of painting, but they may well hold up here too.

I started painting when I was a child – creating bright blue Ultramarines on brilliant green grass bases. I wasn't very good at painting then, but I was inspired by the artwork in *White Dwarf* – I want to create something like those Golden Demon winners or the professional painters of the time. And *Two Thin Coats* has allowed me to time travel back to that time (except the grass doesn't glow any more). I can grab the (usually strange) models found in board games and create paint schemes that remind me of those old slightly wonky minis that existed before the Third Edition of *Warhammer 40,000*. I'm sure someone with much more skill than me would pull something more impressive out of this set, but that fact that my painting has become so much better in such a short time shows that there's something special here. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

If, like me, you've wanted to get back in to painting a more serious way – and you're not sure which way to hold an airbrush, what a zenithal priming is, or indeed, how to slap chop – then pick up a set of *Two Thin Coats*. I can't promise (though it might) it will make your work better, but it'll definitely be more fun.

CALL TO ADVENTURE: EPIC ORIGINS

That's 'epic' with a small 'e'

Designer: Chris & Johnny O'Neal | Publisher: Brotherwise Games



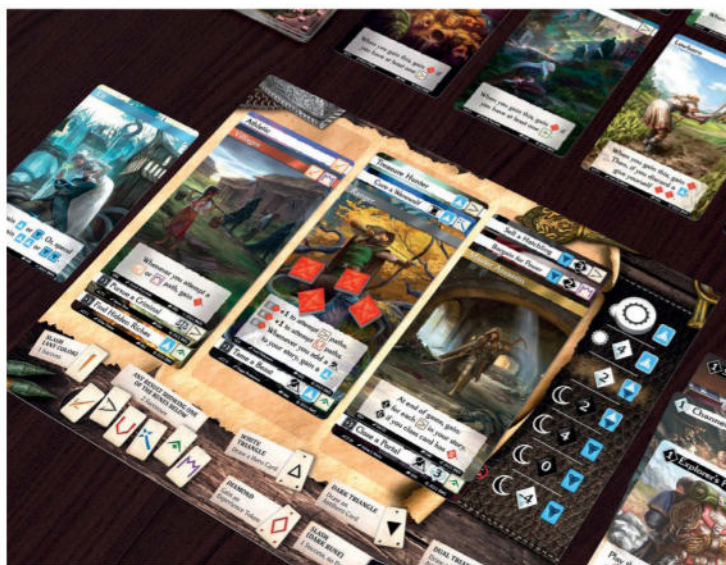
I love a good fantasy game. From *D&D* in my teens, through *Magic* and PC games, through many years in online MMORPGs, it's the genre I keep coming back to. But fantasy board games have a sketchy history, as every step away from roleplaying to board game seems to lose more from the storytelling than it recovers from clever mechanisms.

Some games, such as *Terra Mystica* or *Tales of Glory*, leave the pretence of story at the door and revel in their abstract nature, bolting on the theme in the same way most modern board games do. No harm in that. While dungeon crawlers such as the *D&D* range and *Gloomhaven* have enough story that like-minded groups can tell an epic tale, as long as they're willing to wade through the admin. Again, all good.

It's in the middle ground where the wheels often come off. And *Call to Adventure: Epic Origins* may be the best (worst?) example yet. At its core the game is a short abstract card and dice experience. But the runes (read: two-sided dice), card titles, and fantasy art allegedly deliver an 'epic' tale. In reality, for this to be true you're going to need an incredibly active imagination and a desperate desire to eke out some sort of fantasy experience. Fans of the original *Call to Adventure* should know everything here is compatible with the original, but this game also stands alone.

The rulebook gave me a genuine lol. On page 10 we're told, "Runes give *Call to Adventure* the element of chance." Let's wind back the previous nine pages. First, we deal each player eight cards, from five different decks, from which they'll keep five. Two you have no choices on, while the others are an A or B decision deciding your starting runes, special ability, and end game scoring conditions. This creates your character. Next, you'll shuffle then display four cards from story deck one, and prep five more random card decks for later usage. All this before we've got to page 10's 'element of chance'.

A player turn involves choosing a story card to challenge, then rolling the appropriate runes if required. Each challenge has two of six tired *D&D* tropes (strength, dexterity, etc), which decide the applicable runes. Choose one of two difficulty options, roll runes, succeed or fail. You can use Hero cards to mitigate, but it adds little to the experience. There is no story book or even card text. All you get is, 'rescue a prisoner', 'embark on a quest', etc. If you find more theme in that than, say, 'New York to Seattle', then fair play. But it is you doing the work, not the game.



Each story card you claim gives more runes and perhaps scoring symbols, with later challenges needing more successes. The number of cards you can claim is set, so over time challenges become more random rather than harder. As you know the main boss's two symbols from the start, you'll likely aim to maximise those while going for your own secret end game condition. But the latter is risky, because if you don't collectively defeat the boss everyone loses. Bosses do what they always do in these games, adding a small set of tweaks to gameplay to add variety.

Yes, *Call to Adventure: Epic Origins* is a cooperative game but with only one winner. If you're lucky, the boss and your starting lucky draw cards align. Otherwise, you can build up for the boss, do the most damage, but probably get low points on your secret score card and lose. Or you ignore the boss, thinking you'll win or all die horribly and pointlessly, let the others take the boss down, then maybe congrats, you're the winner. It's a terrible idea and it plays as poorly as it sounds. Especially as the level of randomness in those final confrontations is overwhelmingly high.

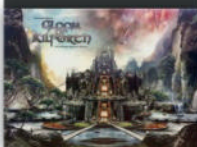


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Cardboard player mats
- ▶ 200 Cards
- ▶ 24 Rune stones
- ▶ 7 Campaign envelopes (cards included above)
- ▶ 50 Small cardboard tokens
- ▶ Score pad

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED GLOOM OF KILFORTH...

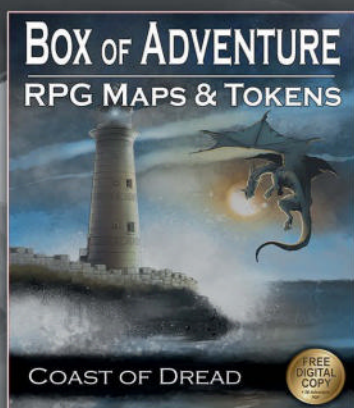
If you're looking for a shorter, lighter version of *Gloom of Kilforth*



Alternatively, there is a competitive mode, but that doesn't include the bosses at all. So, you can throw all the semi-interesting content straight back in the box. Or it has a 'campaign'. This is a series of seven tiny envelopes that add a few short parts of story, a couple of cards to the main decks, and a new boss each time. It's as half-hearted as it sounds. And, sadly, a fitting way to conclude one of the more disappointing fantasy card games I've played. 🗡️

CHRIS MARLING

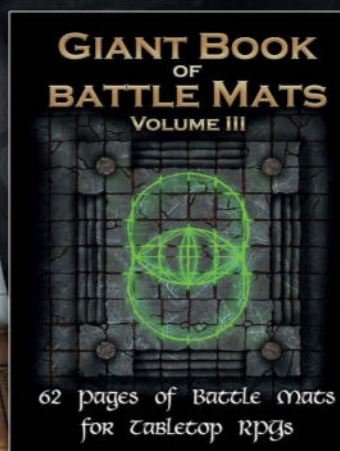
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Words and photographs by **Andy Leighton**



THE NECROMANCER'S LAIR

WOOD - TORTURE RACK & TABLE, TOOL TABLE, COFFIN, TRAPDOOR, LADDER AND GRAVE MARKER

STAGE 1

Thondia Brown: Apply a basecoat.



STAGE 2

Mournfang Brown: Apply a heavy drybrush.



STAGE 3

Steel Legion Drab: Apply a drybrush.



STAGE 4

Karak Stone: Apply a light drybrush, focussed on the edges.



STONE - PORTAL RIM & BASE, SPELL TILE, TOMBS, GRAVESTONES, TRAP BASES AND STATUE

STAGE 1

Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat.



STAGE 2

Mechanicus Standard Grey: Apply a heavy drybrush.



STAGE 3

Dawnstone: Apply a drybrush.



STAGE 4

Celestra Grey: Apply a light drybrush, focussed on the edges.



PORTAL & SPELL



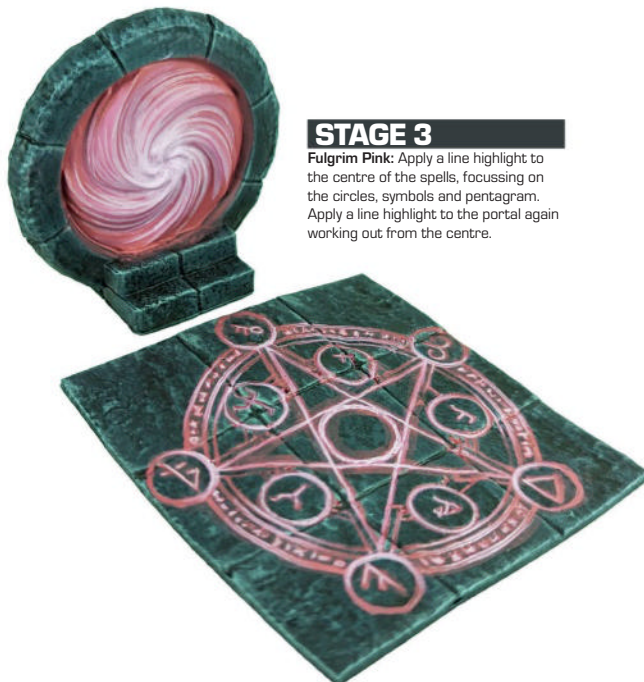
STAGE 1

Pink Horror: Apply a basecoat.



STAGE 2

Emperor's Children: Apply a thinned layer to the spells, slightly water down the paint to help it flow into the lines. For the portal work out from the centre.



STAGE 3

Fulgrim Pink: Apply a line highlight to the centre of the spells, focussing on the circles, symbols and pentagram. Apply a line highlight to the portal again working out from the centre.



STAGE 4

White Scar: Apply a spot highlight to the spells, focussing on crossing points and symbols. Apply a layer to the centre of the portal, and a line highlight of the most prominent swirls.

THE NECROMANCER'S LAIR

METALS - TRAPS, TOOLS, IRON MAIDEN AND CHAINS

STAGE 1

Warplock Bronze: Apply a basecoat.



STAGE 2

Leadbelcher: Apply a drybrush.



STAGE 3

Agrax Earthshade: Apply a shade.



STAGE 4

Canoptek Alloy: Apply a light drybrush.



DEMON

STAGE 1

Pink Horror: Apply a basecoat to the flames.

Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the skin.



STAGE 2

Emperor's Children: Apply a thinned layer to the flames.

Thunderhawk Blue: Apply a thinned layer to the skin, focussing on the top areas.

Pink Horror: Apply a thinned layer to the under areas, as well as the eyes and mouth.

XV-88: Apply a layer to the horns and claws.



STAGE 3

Fulgrim Pink: Apply a spot highlight to the flames.

Emperor's Children: Apply a line highlight to the under areas.

Rakarth Flesh: Apply a layer to the horns and claws.



STAGE 4

Fulgrim Pink: Apply a spot highlight to the under areas.

Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a spot highlight to the horns and claws.



CLOTH & BONE - STRAPS, ROPES

STAGE 1

XV-88: Apply a basecoat.



STAGE 2

Tallarn Sand: Apply a layer.



STAGE 3

Rakarth Flesh: Apply a line highlight.



STAGE 4

Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a spot highlight.



DIRT



STAGE 1

Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat.



STAGE 3

Steel Legion Drab: Apply a drybrush.



STAGE 2

Doombull Brown: Apply a heavy drybrush.



STAGE 4

Karak Stone: Apply a light drybrush.



SCENICS

Apply static grass and hobby leaves to the dirt section of gravestones and Blood for the Blood God to the torture tools and traps.



tabletop GAMING



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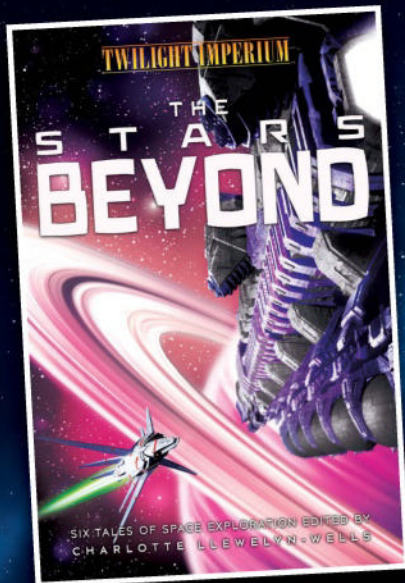
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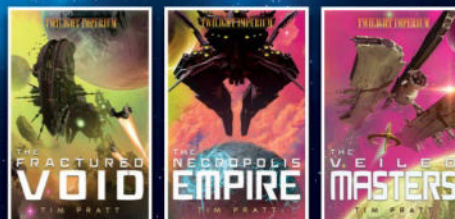
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THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

THE PERILS OF PVP

Sometimes you just don't get along

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

Did you know there isn't actually a rule stating that being in the same adventuring party means you have to get along? Fictional personalities bump heads just as much as real ones, and if a campaign runs long enough, two (or more) of your heroes will inevitably find themselves squaring up across the table.

The causes of these disputes are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Over the years, I've seen characters fall out over everything from a few gold pieces to the fate of the gods themselves, and if I'm being honest, the former was *much* more vicious than the latter.

Most of the time, hero-on-hero arguments stay strictly within the bounds of roleplay. The paladin clashes with the wizard over the fate of the forbidden tome they recovered from the necromancer's lair, but everything plays out in words. There may be accusations, threats, and curses, but nobody needs to get the dice involved.

Every now and then, however, things spill over into the realm of the strictly mechanical. Characters start swinging swords, picking pockets, and trying to melt their comrades' flesh with arcane energy.

This is where we enter the realm of PvP (player vs. player) gameplay.

It's also where things can become an absolute bloody nightmare.

PVP = MORE THAN STABBING PEOPLE

Before I head off on a rant, let's get a few things defined. When I talk about PvP, I don't just mean an in-character disagreement. I only really count the occasions where game mechanics become involved.

This commonly means getting into an actual, everybody-roll-initiative fight, but it also includes trying to use persuasion checks or magical spells to influence another character's actions. If you're casting *Time Stop* to keep your buddy from chasing after her ex or hacking their gear so they perform badly in the next fight, that's PvP in my book.

Also, just in case it wasn't obvious, this doesn't apply to the handful of games where some degree of intra-party conflict is inherent

to the game. Obviously, if the rules are expecting you to occasionally get into a slap-fight, that's not going to break anything.,

Outside of this handful of exceptions, however, I've never gotten on with PvP. For me, it's always ended up in the same category as "*the ranger who only speaks in animalistic grunts*" and "*the barbarian who thinks he's a wizard*" – cool on paper, an endless source of irritation at the table.

There are a few reasons for this.

WHY IT DOESN'T WORK FOR ME

The most common issue I encounter with PvP is that it has a terrible tendency to lead to hurt feelings and strained relationships.

It's easy for those who believe that mature, sensible grown-ups shouldn't get upset at a game of make-believe to scoff at this kind of thing, but at their heart, most RPGs are social games. A decent proportion of players aren't going to enjoy having their cleric pick-pocketed by a grinning teammate after every dungeon raid, and if the issue persists, they're likely to start looking for more enjoyable ways to spend their Wednesday evenings.

Beyond this, PvP has a terrible habit of limiting players' options to tell their own stories how they want to. It's hard for the rogue to sneak off and get up to illicit doings at night if the paladin insists they spend every night on watch and forces endless perception checks. While this may be in character, it can be hellishly frustrating for the player forced to abandon a neat storyline because someone else wanted to play party cop.

If things get bad enough, there's even a risk that no-holds-barred PvP can end up with players fighting to control the direction of the entire game. This is pretty rare, but if a GM allows charisma checks to effectively act as mind control ("*I rolled a 29; you have to do what I say!*"), you can end up in situations where a single character effectively acts as a puppetmaster to the rest of the group. I shouldn't have to explain why this is a miserable situation for 90% of the table.

Ultimately, however, the biggest reason I don't like PvP is included in the name. Conflict between characters is good drama. Conflict between players – which is what a lot of PvP eventually leads to – is a great way to turn an exciting campaign into another LFG posting at your local game store

THE SOLUTION

Just ban it.

THE ACTUAL SOLUTION

Okay, fine.

The fact of the matter is that sooner or later, one or more of the characters in your campaign will fall out with each other. When this happens, you'll need some way to manage it with a little more flexibility than a blanket ban.

At a base level, I would always have a rule that any PvP has to be consensual – both parties must agree to a scrap before it goes ahead. People don't need to justify why they don't want to fight or how they avoid it. If they say no, the table needs to work out a non-stabby way to move things forward.

Honestly, this approach heads off a decent amount of problems on its own, but it's still pretty limited. Fortunately, there are a couple of other options.

If you still like the idea of conflict staying on the table, but don't want to leave things up to the cruel hands of fate, I've recently run into a particularly cunning method for managing PvP – allowing the victim to decide the consequences.

Essentially, this states that players can do whatever they want to each other, but if you initiate any hostile act your target gets to decide how things play out. For example, if the paladin wants to catch the rogue sneaking out of the tavern and stop them in their tracks, the rogue's player gets to make a choice about how the scene plays out.

Maybe they just decide that their thief is too nimble and quick to be caught, and all the paladin finds is an empty bed. Maybe they think it would be cool to have a confrontation on the rooftop before their character flits into the night. Maybe they actually think that, yeah, it would be kind of cool to have the paladin catch them in the act and stir up some drama and tension among the party.

This approach allows players to make their own stories without having to worry about finding avenues cut off by other characters' superior stats. It doesn't limit options – the paladin can always *try* to catch the rogue, after all – and encourages players to concentrate on building a narrative rather than trying to win.

Crucially, the victim-picks-consequences approach also scales well to the mood of the table. If you're playing with a group who are happy with a bit of argy-bargy and enjoy some conflict amongst the party, it's easy for the players to hash out a neat story that helps this grow into a plot point rather than a pain point. If, however, you find that players are choosing to avoid the conflict altogether, there's a good chance that PvP wouldn't be a good fit for the table in the first place. 🍷



SHOP SPOTLIGHT

BOARDS AND SWORDS

Ian and Rob, who co-own Boards and Swords, started selling subscription trading card loot boxes out of Ian's garage in 2015 – now they're running their own store

Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

Tell us a little bit about how the store got started?

We'd always wanted a big, accessible playing space in Derby and when an opportunity for funding from X-Forces came around in 2017, we decided to put together a business plan and go for it. Once we found a location the store went from a piece of paper to reality in about two months. We put together a Kickstarter as a way of reaching out to the gaming community locally and that gave us a huge boost for our opening weekend. This formed the basis of the gaming community associated with the store and it has only grown from there.

What's it like being a FLGS in your area?

Derby and the Midlands is a great area to run a store. We're relatively close to everywhere in the UK, which means that when we put on big events we tend to get people travelling from all over the country. With Derby being close to Nottingham, the home of a lot of wargaming companies, there is a really big scene for tabletop miniature gaming and we've become a good outlet for people to get these games on the table, with a dedicated space and set up. We even have some of those companies come to the store to try out new games, and we work with a few of them to put on special events marking anniversaries of historic battles, like the large scale Black Seas Trafalgar event we hosted last year.

What do you think makes your store unique?

We have a fairly big space available, 19 6x4 tables and 11 card game tables, which means we always have a great mix of games being

played. It's not uncommon for there to be multiple card games being played each day as well as tabletop miniatures games like Warhammer 40,000, Heresy, Malifaux, and Marvel Crisis Protocol. There's often D&D and board games being played as well, all on one evening. This means that our community has access to a wide variety of games without it feeling like we are tied to stocking or pushing one system in particular.

What events do you run for the local gaming scene?

We run events for just about everything! We have card game events on Magic, Pokemon, Yu-Gi-Oh!, Digimon, My Hero Academia, One Piece and Cardfight Vanguard each week and we run tabletop events at the weekend. These are normally once a month for Warhammer 40,000, Age of Sigmar, Malifaux, Conquest etc. We also do specific nights for people to come and play certain games in store each week, so they can meet other players and get the most out of their hobby.

What's been your favourite part of running the store so far?

Hands down it's the community and the people that we've met running the store. We've made friends for life and we know we wouldn't have a successful store without them. Our aim was to create a friendly, accessible, and welcoming environment for local gamers to immerse themselves in their hobby and be a place where they can feel comfortable doing it. It's always heartening to see people come



out of their shell by coming to the store - I can remember one lad who used to come down for Pokémon each week and not say a word, but eventually he started to get more comfortable with us and now is an integral part of lots of the card gaming communities.

What are your plans for the future?

We'd like to move to a bigger place in the next few years so that we can have even more gaming space, a larger retail area, and maybe a cafe offering more food options. At the moment though we're content with continuing to grow the community locally and let's be honest, there is nothing better than the buzz and chatter of a full store. 🐉

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CIRCA 1630 CRIBBAGE

Cribbage has been described, somewhat tongue-in-cheekily, as cross between a board game and a card game, it being supposedly a race game played on a track of 61, 121 or 181 holes from 'start' to 'home' and using cards as the mechanism of movement. This conceit is easily refuted by noting that you can dispense with the board and score with pencil and paper (not that any serious player would stoop so low), while cards themselves are indispensable.

I won't outline the rules here, as there are so many more interesting things to talk about, but, if you really never played, the illustrated description at <http://bit.ly/3VCId1D> looks pretty good.

The game is traditionally credited to Sir John Suckling (1609—42), reportedly "the greatest gallant of his time and the greatest gamester, both at bowling and cards." Sir John was a courtier under Charles I and Cribbage enjoyed courtly status throughout the seventeenth century. "God send you," wrote Charles II to a friend, "better lucke at pickett than I have with Harry Bennett at cribbage." But this social cache was soon lost, it being excluded from *The Court Gamester* of 1719, whose author in 1732 classes it as one of the lower-class games like Whist, All Fours, and Put. Dickens subsequently portrays it as played ruinously by Little Nell's grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

If Suckling did play a part in its creation, it may have been only to add the 'crib' to an earlier existing game called Noddy, or Knave Noddy. 'Cribbage' is not recorded earlier than 1630, when Suckling was twenty-one. It basically means the gaining of an unfair advantage by 'cribbing', as might be applicable to the dealer's advantage of scoring from the crib. Crib also means 'box', and it is

interesting that the dealer is customarily said to be 'in the box'. Noddy means 'fool' (supposedly always nodding off). In card-game history Knaves or Jacks are traditionally fools – indeed, the Joker was only developed as a glorified Jack in the 19th-century game of Jucker or Euchre. The special score of 'one for his nob' (head) and 'two for his heels' reflects the time when face cards were depicted at full length rather than two tops and no bottom.

Noddy is basically Cribbage, but without the crib,



and a point of interest is that in the play up to 31 you also score for making 25. Besides Cribbage, it engendered a more elaborate derivative called Costly Colours, or just Costly, which survived in some parts of the country, notably Shropshire, until well into the 19th century. Indeed, one of my correspondents believes he saw it being played as late as the 1950s. In the play you peg, for making 15, 25 or 31, not just 1 or 2 points but one for each constituent card. Combinations in hand included not only flushes but also 'colours'. For example three of the same suit scores 3, but of the same colour only 2. Four in suit was the eponymous 'Costly Colours', for which you peg 6.

Crib is not just a game; it's a tradition, a cultural treasure unique (so far as I can tell) to the English-speaking world. Long may it flourish!

For more details, see www.parlettgames.uk/histocs/noddy.html and www.parlettgames.uk/histocs/costly.html 🎲



ABOVE Cribbage boards, plain and fancy.

ABOVE LEFT Regency Cribbage cartoon. *Left player:* Prodigious!! Then I am diddled again! Monstrous! Oblige me with a pinch of your mixture or I shall expire! *Right player:* Fifteen six, a flush and his whig [*sic*] makes me out. 'Pon honour, 'tis really astonishing. You are not in luck. (George Cruikshank, 1817).

LEFT Cribbage in play at an Elephant & Castle pub, 1949 (Getty images).

David Parlett is a games inventor and historian, author of *The Oxford History of Card Games* and its sequel on board games, and a visiting professor of games design at the University of Suffolk.



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